A Companion to Art Theory

Edited by

Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde

Blackwell Publishing

A Companion to Art Theory

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Preface

The broad aim of this book is to provide the reader with essays elucidating aspects of theory relevant to the European-based traditions of art. Of course, what counts as art theory is contestable. This book certainly does not seek to settle the issue, but rather to throw some light on the content, practice and reception of one local strand. To this extent, its main aim is not to provide a philosophical debate about the nature of art, nor a sociological account of the relationship between art theory and the institutions from which it emerges, nor a psychological explanation of what artistic creativity is, even though it touches on all of these issues. Instead, it aims to give the reader a survey of some of the main themes of Western art theory and of how these constitute a particular tradition which has generated, modified and criticized its own contents, whilst assimilating and remaining open to ideas and discourses external to itself.

To some extent this limited scope is a function of the fact that this book was conceived as a companion volume to the three-volume *Art in Theory* anthology, published by Blackwell Publishers. However, the present volume seeks to extend that brief in several ways. First, its chronological range extends considerably further back than the *Art in Theory* volumes: to the roots of modern art theory in Renaissance Italy, and to sources of and contrasts with this body of thinking in the Classical and Medieval world. Secondly, it considers some less well-known aspects of art theory which may fill in some of the gaps in its genealogy. Both ambitions are grounded in the hope that this book, while it can never be exhaustive, might nevertheless contribute to an overview of the longer tradition of art theory in which relationships between different theoretical discussions are apparent. The corollary of this particular focus is that the present volume omits many aspects of art theory from extended consideration because these topics – visual culture, other cultures, feminist theory, film and photographic theory – are represented in other Blackwell *Companions*.

None of this means to claim that there is a unitary body of Western art theory, nor that it follows a linear narrative or teleology. But even the more complex idea that art theory has many branches stemming from a single trunk is less adequate

than a model that can show how theory proliferates rather like a rhizome, or network of roots. This does not mean, however, that there are no nodal points in such an array, whose participation in several developments makes them worthy of special attention. The notion of ideology, for example, may have a central place within Marxist art theory, yet, even while being criticized, it has also formed an important reference point for other theories about the power of representations, including feminism, discourse theory, Poststructuralism and Deconstruction – all of which can themselves be seen to be interrelated.

This book has a roughly chronological organization, the main advantage of which is that it offers a 'rolling' critique of art theory. For instance, the work of Peirce and Barthes, and other varieties of semiotics, offer critical perspectives on the theory of the 'sign' developed in medieval times and by Lessing in the eighteenth century, while these theories are themselves interrogated by Derrida and Deconstruction in general. This book thus draws on the ability of the tradition of art theory to question itself, first of all by presenting much of its material in an arrangement that captures something of this dialogue, and secondly by including essays which explicitly feature such dialogical encounters. The book also attempts to confront theories in a variety of ways: in some essays, the power of a theory is tested against its ability to explain a particular 'test case' work or works of art; in others, works of art are themselves given the role of interrogating theory; in yet other essays, one theory is tested against another. The assumption that many contributors have worked with, in other words, is that no theory is sacrosanct. They have shown instead that respecting any theory too much runs the risk of making it hermetic: that it can become obscure, unassailable and unself-critical if taken too much on its own terms. Therefore, some of the essays in this book are specifically concerned to reveal the inbuilt criteria of coherence, or the tacit assumptions about history, art or causality that can underpin theories of art. Others seek to show the aspect-blindness and closures that theory can induce, especially when internal theoretical considerations become less important than what a theory can do. And some pursue the possibility that it is part of the job of abstract reflection on art (as opposed to something radically different) to question whether there can be a theory of art at all.

In all these respects, and perhaps most importantly the last, this book is designed to meet a variety of important critical and sometimes sceptical views on the nature and possibility of art theory that have developed relatively recently. The earliest is a view to be found in the 'New Art History' of the 1970s and early 1980s. A particular target of this 'revisionist' phase was the view, deriving from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics (and from certain readings of Kant and Schopenhauer in particular), which was central to much modernist art theory, that art provided an aesthetic experience characterized by disinterest, which made it autonomous from the practical interests of life, or that the work of art somehow embodied an autonomous realm of value. In opposing these formalistic approaches, much Marxist and feminist theory sought to show how art

served to misrepresent the class and gender interests it reproduced as objective or 'natural', and hence how the notion of autonomy itself was part of an ideology that occluded or naturalized this repressive effect. In similar ways, psychoanalysis was used to show how art sought to convert aspects of a masculine way of seeing, rooted in developmental anxiety, into power. Varieties of semiotics supported such readings of art and their implications for art theory. The critique of autonomy, especially, found further support from developments in discourse theory with its idea that art (like any other modes or genres of representation) is a vehicle through which power reproduces itself by regulating what can and cannot be represented, and how.

Since such critiques have proven very powerful, especially in combination (as in theories of the gaze that draw simultaneously upon psychoanalysis and Foucauldian theories of power/knowledge), part of the aim of this book is to present some of their developments. They have undoubtedly resulted in a profound change in contemporary theories of art, and perhaps also in an idea, foundational to the discipline of visual culture, that considerations of aesthetic quality are largely irrelevant to the understanding of visual representations. Nevertheless, even the mature forms of revisionist criticism leave problems and issues concerning their own theoretical coherence and methodological probity, some of which this book has sought to consider. The 'theory' that looked as though it occupied a special, metatheoretical, position in relation to traditional art theory is, in other words, itself the subject of critical scrutiny in this book.

The next phase of the sceptical examination of art theory can perhaps be identified with the arrival, sometime in the mid-1980s, of fully fledged postmodernism, one of whose landmarks was Victor Burgin's apocalyptically titled *The End of Art Theory* (1986). A central claim of this was that traditional art theory, and hence the very notion of art, could be traced to the progressively individuated and institutionalized 'grand narratives' of an Enlightenment project which had attempted, but failed, to establish legitimating principles grounding science, ethics and aesthetics. Theory now was conceived as situated and more piecemeal, as responsive to the interests of particular groups and as necessarily fragmented or activated by conflicting forces. The idea that postmodernism marks a catastrophic break with traditional art theory is very strong, and is recapitulated in recent interventions in art theory, notably in Arthur Danto's *After the End of Art* (1997). Here, the claim is made that the 'atmosphere of theory', which once lent a characteristic seriousness and unity to the notion of art, irrevocably changed or dissipated towards the end of the twentieth century, largely in response to what was perceived as Warhol's (and before that, Duchamp's) challenge to the very idea of art.

There is no denying that such ideas have profoundly affected our own ideas about what art can be. But the absence of grand theory of the sort rejected by postmodern thought does not entail that theoretical reflection on art is no longer possible at all. It is by no means inevitable, therefore, that thinking about art in

the future is destined to be without any significant relationship to the family of practices and theories that forms the bulk of what is considered here.

Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde

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PART ONE

Tradition and the Academy

Alberti and the Formation of Modern Art Theory

Carolyn Wilde

Art and Theory

If we ask what a theory of art is, then both terms of our question seem problematic. What counts as a *theory*, whether it be of natural phenomenon – such as a theory of optics or perception – or of cultural changes such as forms of visual representation or artistic styles, depends not only on the nature of the subject matter, but also on the questions asked and the methods used in searching for answers. And in the case of *art* we are asking about a complex web of historical and not easily bounded set of practices, interweaving with different social interests and values in a variety of ways. We also recognize that theoretical and practical activities are very different, each with their own social and intellectual purposes and contexts as well as, of course, different linguistic or material identities. Whereas a theory is a linguistic construct which abstracts from experience and *generalizes* over the particular, art requires *particular* judgement within a sensible medium. Yet art and theory cannot be examined independently of one another – for how the modern concept of art is understood and used has much to do with the ways in which the practices of art have been theorized. Art in the modern sense is practice informed by theory, a practice with a particularly self-conscious sense of its own history. But a theoretical account of art does not simply aim to describe the general principles of the practice; rather, it draws from other cognate discourses, such as philosophy or social theory, directing new forms of critical attention to the practice. Furthermore, theory, in this context as in all others, is essentially contestable. Thus, although art theory, unlike art criticism, does not specifically aim to mediate between particular and public experience, the very process of theoretical reflection on art contributes to its development and to framing its reception.

There are of course many different kinds of theories of art, drawing from different discursive disciplines such as rhetoric, philosophy or cultural theory, and also from the empirical sciences. But a rough distinction can be drawn between

the discursive and the scientific. The former aims to further the understanding of art, using language and ideas which, albeit rarefied and sophisticated, are continuous with the understanding of those involved in the practice. Whereas those based on more scientific methods, aiming more at explanation, bypass the agent's own understanding, even in some cases explaining it away. Crucial to such a distinction is the issue of value. A theory aiming to develop cultural self-understanding of a practice will necessarily involve, even if only implicitly, evaluative and normative principles. This is because any understanding of human agency requires some framework of interests and values, even when it is mounting a critique of these things. In contrast a strictly empirical or scientific account of the biological basis of creativity, or the psychophysical basis of perception, need not take account of value, at least in the terms in which the value is practically understood. The theory of art discussed in this introduction draws from both literature (classical rhetoric) and natural philosophy (optics and geometry), and aims directly to address the practice of the artist. In doing so it involves substantial claims about the values of art, both in general terms, as a cultural practice, and in particular cases, in critical judgement about individual works.

During the second half of the twentieth century the theoretical side of the relationship between theory and practice became increasingly dominant: a great deal of contemporary artwork is meaningless and even valueless without direct recourse to some theoretical context, signalled through titles, catalogue descriptions, critical essays or other textual supplements. Although there were various institutional and educational factors influencing this state of affairs, one in particular was the radical dislocation of art from other social and practical interests during the processes of modernity. Thus other, more central, forms of visual production, such as cinema and advertising, which are more directly concerned with entertainment or the processes of commodification, were culturally separated from High Art. Of course, the meanings and communicative strategies of these other areas of work can be theorized, as they are within the broader disciplines of Cultural or Media Studies, and these disciplines themselves share some common ground with art theory. But the role of theory in those cases has more to do with disclosing what is hidden, the 'doubleness' or even duplicity of the image, than with relating the thought which the work itself may be said to manifest to some wider understanding of its manner and means of representation. (The interaction between all these forms of visual culture is itself a complex matter, since most contemporary art, even whilst maintaining the cultural hierarchy, intertrades with popular culture.) The separation of art from other forms of visual production, however, did not begin in the modern period. My purpose in returning to Alberti's *Treatise on Painting*, written in the mid-fifteenth century, is to show how themes of this work not only played a formative role in the development of what subsequently became dignified as Fine Art, but are also a continuing source of the elevated cultural status of art.

Beginning with Alberti

Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) wrote what is often claimed to be the first work of art theory, his *Treatise on Painting* in 1435. In concluding this work he claimed explicitly to be the first to write about this subtle art of painting, and to be elucidating its basic pictorial and thematic principles in a way which proved it worthy of free men. This reference to free men is significant. For it signals Alberti's Humanist aspiration to raise the art of painting, from a technical or manual skill in which the artist applies techniques without understanding of principles, to the status of a liberal art alongside rhetoric or astronomy. The idea of a liberal art, central to the idea of a liberal education, is that a free man has knowledge of the principles informing his decisions.

Alberti's work is a prime example of how any theory which seeks to give an account of the methods and meaning of art is not merely descriptive of existing practices, but normative. As such it contributes both to the development of the practice and to the ways it is evaluated. The influence of the particular principles and values that Alberti sought to articulate have resonated in various ways within the subsequent history of the art. Most directly, they were formative within the academic tradition of painting, which was still in play in the nineteenth century and remained in vestigial form in twentieth-century art teaching. The various and diverse manifestations of Classicism (such as Neoclassicism, *l'art pompier*, the various 'returns to order' in French and Italian art in the 1920s and 1930s, or the varieties of Socialist Realism throughout the last century), appropriated such principles in furtherance of particular political or social allegiances. For the sense of order and unity, which classical principles of composition generate, can be made to stand for some mythical ideal of social or transcendent order. But more dynamically, they were also foils to the challenge and polemics of Romanticism and the disruption of such ideals in favour of a more dynamic and revolutionary conceptions of human and natural order. Even when modernist principles overturned the academic tradition, many developments in twentieth-century painting were, in different ways, single-minded explorations of the scope, limits and transgressive possibilities of ideas of pictorial space and painterly content which have an origin in Alberti's conception of his theoretical task.

Alberti first published the *Treatise on Painting*, in Latin, under the title *De Pictura*, and dedicated to the Gonzaga prince of the court of Mantua. But he directly followed this with a vernacular translation, *Della Pittura*, dedicated to Brunelleschi, whose experiments with mathematical perspective in his architectural work were applied to the art of painting by Alberti in Book One of the *Treatise*. He also acknowledged Donatello, Ghiberti and, perhaps most significantly, the painter Masaccio, artists who played a prominent role in the flowering of the new artistic culture which Alberti had found when returning to Florence after his period of family exile. The fact that Alberti wrote versions in

both scholarly and vernacular languages, dedicated the work both to the learned court and to practising artists, and extolled the work of the most innovative artists of his own times, shows something of the complex public he wished to address. Alberti was seeking to develop shared intellectual interests between artists, scholars and patrons. In Book Two he offers direct arguments in support of his claims about 'the nobility' of the art of painting. First he points out that, as an art of representation, painting can 'make the absent present', can represent the dead to the living, or even further piety through representations of the Gods (1991, pp. 60–4). In these examples Alberti is drawing on themes which are recurrent in his voluminous writings on many other subjects, including friendship, the family, and civic values as they are cultivated though a public sense of history, tradition and virtue. (See Godel (1969), Jarzombeck (1989) and Grafton (2000) for accounts putting Alberti's *Treatise on Painting* into context with his vast literary output, which includes his substantial works on architecture and on the family, as well as plays and satires.) Alberti goes on to claim that the values of the art of painting supersede the value of any precious jewels or objects that painting can depict, since, he says, it is in the divine gift of the painter to produce things of beauty that set the standard for all other things. In a remark that signals the ensuing debate about the respective status and values of the various arts, the *paragone*, he ventures to assert that whatever beauty there is in all the other arts, in architecture, sculpture or the work of the stonemason or other craftsmen, it is guided by the rule and art of the painter. (For the paragone debate – the dispute about the comparative status of the various arts – see chapter 5 in this volume.) By this he means that the principles of composition which he describes in Book Two of the *Treatise*, based as they are on principles of harmony, decorum and correct measure or proportion, or, as he calls it, *concinnatus*, are germane to all the arts. Thus one central theme of the *Treatise* is how the art of painting distinctively embodies the beautiful, not merely by depicting beautiful things, but by ordering its own process in accordance with fine compositional principles. Although it is not Alberti's formulation, in the subsequent classical tradition, painting was in fact to be defined as that art of representation which aims at beauty. This is the source idea of the concept of the Fine or Beaux Arts. Although the concept of beauty became derelict in the context of twentieth-century art, nevertheless, Alberti's call upon this concept, in relating artistic principles to the serious themes of art, still exerted its force. When the artist Maurice Denis was to say, at the turn of the twentieth century, that the painter should subordinate the charm of detail to the beauty of the whole, guided by the necessity of structural relationships and by mathematical proportions, he was speaking from this Albertian tradition.

Another theme which also runs through many of Alberti's works, including, particularly, his plays and satires, is the Stoic theme of the relation between fame and fortune. In the *Treatise* he calls attention more than once to the way the art of painting can bring fame to the individual artist. Although the culture of celebrity is now an integral part of Fine Art production, Alberti was writing at

a time before the idea of individual genius had been authorized by Vasari and personified in Michelangelo. Alberti's inclinations are more towards the cultivation of *ingegno* as talent and skill, rather than as genius. (It was Neoplatonic ideas of divine inspiration, of interest to Ficino and his circle at the Medici court, that were to have the stronger influence on Romantic and Modern notions of artistic genius.) Significantly, this accords with the fact that Alberti wrote from the standpoint of the practitioner, whereas others, such as Ficino and Vasari, were more concerned with the viewer's reception and evaluation of the work. Thus he paid more attention to the material process of the activity of painting than to the idea of some image in the mind supposedly transcribed into art. But fame has to be worthy of its praise. So, 'you who strive to excel in painting, should cultivate above all the fame and reputation which you see the Ancients attained, and in so doing it will be well to remember that avarice was always the enemy of renown and virtue' (1991, p. 64). This not only shows how the return to 'the Ancients', both as a source of learned education and as models for drawing, is going to play such a dominant role in the subsequent development of the art, but also how Alberti brings his Aristotelian sense of how *the virtues of good practice* bear on *the value of the work*. These virtues are, as we shall see, both practical and intellectual.

The Rich Wisdom of Minerva

Alberti explains that his *Treatise* divides into three parts. 'The first, which is entirely mathematical, shows how this noble and beautiful art arises from roots within Nature herself. The second puts the art into the hands of the artist, distinguishes its parts and explains them all. The third instructs the artist how he may and should attain complete mastery and understanding of the art of painting' (1991, p. 35). Book One, which consists of a detailed account of the basis of artificial perspective, draws on medieval and contemporary theories of optics and the geometry of perception to present the principles of this new way of constructing a systematically ordered and visually coherent pictorial space. The use of perspectival techniques was not new. *Skenographia*, or scene painting, which is what Plato was probably speaking of when he denounced the illusionistic skills of the artist in Book Ten of *The Republic*, exploited effects of diminution and recession, and medieval artists also used empirical methods of depicting the relative size of things as they appeared within the imagined space of the picture, or sloping lines to show the side of a building. But they also used other devices, such as reverse perspective, so that a table top and its contents are more apparent. Giotto, however, whose work in the fourteenth century had so amazed the public with its sense of substance and reality, had used elements of linear perspective in constructing images of buildings whose receding angles converged. What Alberti contributed was a precise *method* for constructing the appearances of depth and solidity in paintings, based on mathematical principles, so that such

things as this convergence could be systematically worked out. He showed how the content of the picture could be ordered and placed strictly in accordance with lines which ran at right angles to the picture plane (the orthogonals) converging at a single vanishing point on the horizon of the picture (see Kemp, 1997, chapter 3). Although the Flemish painter Jan van Eyck, for example, working in the early fifteenth century, painted with a rich and vivid sense of spatial coherence, he did this by empirical judgement and unity of light, rather than by applying the geometrical methods described by Alberti. Alberti's aim in the *Treatise* is not only to present the theory of artificial or linear perspective, but to show how such abstract principles can be, as he says, put 'into the hands' of the artist.

In the opening paragraph of Book One Alberti makes this illuminating remark: 'in everything we shall say I earnestly wish it to be borne in mind that I speak in these matters not as a mathematician but as a painter. Mathematicians measure the shapes and forms of things in the mind alone and divorced entirely from matter. We, on the other hand, who wish to talk of things that are visible, will express ourselves in cruder terms' (1991, p. 37). The phrase 'in cruder terms' is translated by Spencer differently as 'uses a more sensate wisdom'.[1] He traces the phrase to a text by Cicero, which Alberti is known to have owned, in which Cicero alludes to cruder or less learned ways of speaking, thus highlighting one of the many ways in which Alberti's text draws directly from classical rhetoric. But in this visual context this fertile phrase alludes to the fact that in the art of painting, thought is directed within the sensible materials of the art. Thus the original Italian phrase *la piu grassa Minerva*, which perhaps translates more directly as 'a little richer, or fatter, wisdom', is particularly apposite, since the painter's materials are clays and other substances worked into a greasy pigment. Significantly he calls upon Minerva, the ancient goddess of wisdom, rather than St Lucy or St Luke, the saints associated with the painter's work. Alberti is showing clearly that he sees his task as showing how the intellectual principles that he calls upon in this work relate to the process of transforming brute matter into a medium of art, that is, something from which meaning can be discerned. Specifically, then, in Book One, the theory of pictorial perspective is an application of abstract mathematical rules, known 'by the mind alone', to a practical process requiring fine judgement about the sensible appearances of real things, in order to construct a convincing sense of solid bodies related coherently in an imagined space.

Point, Line and Plane

Alberti sets off to elucidate the principles of perspectival geometry by introducing the ideas of a point, a line and a plane. The first thing to know, he says, is that a point is a sign and is not divisible into parts. But he then says that he calls a *sign* anything that exists on a surface, so that it is visible to the eye. It is not that the mathematical point is too small to be visible, or that it is invisible,

but that it is not an element in the realm of the visible at all. Similarly, a line, in geometry, has length but not breadth. Thus points and lines are not the same sort of things as dots and marks on a painted work. Yet these intellectual elements must somehow direct the intentional process of the artist's practical thought in making such painterly marks. For, as Alberti says, 'no one will deny that things which are not visible do not concern the painter, for he strives to represent only things which are seen' (1991, p. 37).

How this is done becomes apparent when Alberti shows how the relationship between mathematics, the visible world and the painted marks are made evident in attending to the surfaces of things. He says that the qualities of surfaces are of two sorts. The first, permanent qualities, cannot be changed without altering the figure itself, but the second sort are qualities of things as they appear to change relative to the point of view. For example, the mathematical properties of a circular figure do not change, but the look of a coin, relative to the position of an observer, does, becoming merely a straight line when seen at eye level. Linear perspective in painting depends on establishing a theoretical vantage point from which the *variable* qualities of things, their appearance under perspective, can be systematically organized, so as to appear visually consistent. Although Alberti's method relies on a single vanishing point, many painters exploited the use of several viewpoints and multiple vanishing points for particular pictorial effects. They also related the *theoretical* viewpoint of the picture to the *actual* viewing position of the observer in different ways, the spatially dramatic effects of baroque ceiling painting being one major example. In fact paintings rarely conform to strict Albertian principles of one-point perspective, and it is the active management of the transgressions of those principles that gives focus to particular meanings and effects.

In showing how the mathematical principles of linear perspective apply to the practical processes of painting Alberti uses the Italian term, *orlo*, which is a rim or brim or border, that is a term denoting the edges of physical things. When applying the formal terms of geometry to the activity of painting, Alberti shows how relations between such visible features of things can be systematically depicted through what he calls the process of *circumscription*. Thus in addition to the mathematical concept of line, and sensible examples of linear things in the world, such as the light on the brim of a jug or the embroidery on the hem of a courtier's tunic, we need a third linear element, the idea of a *contour*. In drawing, a contour is not the depiction of a property of something, like the edge of a piece of paper, but the boundary of any form as it appears from a particular viewpoint. This is not merely the outline of a figure but the lines coordinating the three-dimensional surface structure, or form of things, as they stand solidly in space. Thus in drawing a portrait, the contours of the complex solid form of the head vary as it is seen from different angles, and although a contour line may coincide with the upper edge of the eye socket, or even the visible line of the eyebrow, it is not a depiction of either. (Contemporary computer animation utilizes similar coordinates in constructing the moving image.) Thus it is the contours of things,

as they appear from a given viewpoint, which are ordered in accordance with the principles of perspective. In addition to this disciplined attention to contour, Alberti also emphasizes the importance of a systematic treatment of the effects of light in constructing pictorial form.

In his teachings at the Weimar Bauhaus in the 1920s Paul Klee drew upon this tradition of circumscription, moving from point to line to plane, in student exercises. His purpose was not, however, to teach perspective, but to show how the graphic line articulates form, movement and the visual imagination.

For Alberti the work of delineating the form and structure of things, as they will appear in the spatial economy of the picture, is an essential stage of the work. Thus Alberti's way of constructing form in the processes of painting significantly contrasts with workshop methods which rely on examples. Using a pattern book model of how to draw a hand in some particular position, for example, doesn't enable the artist to draw a building. But by using a general method of depiction, in which everything is regulated through the same disciplines of line and plane, if someone can draw one thing, as Michelangelo was to say, then they can draw anything.

This point about the generality of a method of depiction, however, must not be confused with a different sort of claim about the realism or verisimilitude of the method, as though looking at things in a painting could be thought to be just like looking though an open window. For the popular idea that the history of painting in the West since Alberti's times was a gradual progress towards complete verisimilitude ignores the ways in which a method of depiction, no matter how 'naturalistic', brings with it its own interests in and conceptions of what it shows.[2] The different uses of the term 'realism' in painting, connoting different political and social interests, are themselves an illustration of this central fact of the art.

Reality and Alberti's Window

In describing the method of perspective Alberti famously writes, 'Let me tell you what I do when I am painting. First of all, on the surface on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen' (1991, p. 54). In Alberti's system the picture surface is to be thought of as a horizontal plane intersecting the lines of sight between the theoretical viewpoint and the things seen 'in' the painting. All that is seen pictorially is seen within the imagined space of the work. (This contrasts with later Renaissance or Mannerist developments, in which figures might appear to protrude or tumble out from the painted surface.) If we take this to mean that the work will look just like looking out of a window, however, we shall misunderstand Alberti's larger purposes.

Alberti, as we have seen, says that he is to enlarge on the art of painting 'from its first principles in nature'. How distinctions are drawn between art and nature

is often a major clue to the rules guiding the use of the concept of reality. Alberti's reference to nature in his *Treatise* is, as we would expect, neither unambiguous nor unproblematic. There are at least two senses of the term 'nature' at play in his text, in tension one with the other. When Alberti exhorts the painter to refer to nature in the production of his work, he wishes to establish direct experience, *la bona sperienza*, as the foundation of the artist's practice in contrast to basing the work on the use of prefigured schemata. But this is not a straightforward idea of 'copying how things look', for what we are comparing with what, and how we make the comparison, is not simple. What we see when we look at things depends not only on what sort of thing is being looked at and the conditions under which it is seen, but also on the purposes of attention and the methods of looking. Looking at something for the purposes of painting requires its own particular modes of attention and specific perceptual and *conceptual* skills.

Concepts of various sorts direct the understanding in looking at things – in art, for example, such diverse concepts as anatomy, the nude, nakedness or gender, differently direct the attention of both the artist when working and the viewer when looking. Significantly, the contemporary dominance of theory requires the artist to be more aware of and more self-conscious about the conceptual directions of looking, or of 'the gaze'. The education of a painter is partly an education in these conceptual skills. And, from the other end of the process, in looking at a painting, understanding what is seen also requires its own skills. To see that one figure is smaller than another may be to *see* that it is at some distance behind the other, not that it is a smaller person or a less important figure. Similarly, to see the visual rhythms between natural and domestic objects and human bodies, and *thus* the metaphorical relations between them, may need direction. More recently, the traditional conceptual apparatus of Fine Art has been transgressed and displaced – which is one reason for the bafflement of the general public. In general, to see analogies between the use of the medium, the methods of depiction and what is depicted in the work, that is, to see what is represented in terms of its manner of representation, requires various sorts of sophisticated aesthetic attention – even when looking at a painting that uses the most familiar naturalistic conventions.

Alberti's second idea of nature, however, refers us not to the sensible appearances of the world, but back to the application of mathematics. This is the idea of nature as a deeper harmony of things, as the laws governing the appearances of things, as they are understood by the rational intellect. This is not an experiential idea of nature but a theoretical conception more at home in science or philosophy. Thus, when, in the Preface dedicated to Brunelleschi, Alberti says that the First Book of the *Treatise* is 'entirely mathematical, showing how this noble and beautiful art arises from roots within Nature herself' (1991, p. 35), this is not simply the claim that mathematics provides a method for realizing in paint the appearance of things in nature. For it also alludes to Alberti's wider ambitions for the learned status of painting as that art which displays deeper

realities. Such deeper philosophical ambitions for the art of painting have reoccurred in its subsequent developments in different ways. The claim that the intellectual principles of painting give a deeper insight into reality, whether this is metaphysical or socio-political, becomes, after Alberti, an unchallenged shibboleth of the Fine Art of painting. The status conferred on contemporary art depends upon this history.

In Alberti's case his ideas about nature and art involve at least two elements. First, that nature is imitable by art because she is ordered by intelligible principles, and secondly, that through the understanding of these principles the artist can further the purposes of nature by perfecting and completing the process. These ideas clearly introduce a more sophisticated conception of art, for they involve the metaphysical claim that the intellectual disciplines of painting, because they are derived from the same mathematical principles as nature itself, direct a truly objective system of picturing. Although there is evidence throughout Alberti's writings of both Aristotelian and Neoplatonic thought influencing his use of the concept of nature, it is also close to the protoscientific work of Nicholas de Cusa, in which nature, of which the individual is also a part, is a homogeneous whole. The artist in his work creates a microcosm of the real, in its continuity between physical, political and spiritual dimensions.

Thus although Alberti was establishing general conditions for the construction of pictorial space, his system sets new limits, not only to the sorts of things which can be depicted, and to the manner of their depiction, but also to the meanings which those things have. Perspectival space opens up opportunities for the imaginative visualization of experience in new ways, ways that accord with different material interests and economic orders, or different conceptions of humanity itself. (For a discussion of this point in terms of the conflicts between figural and discursive elements of the work, with several examples, see Bryson, 1981, pp. 11–15, 89–91 and 228–30 and 1983, chapter 5.)

On his return to Florence in 1434, when composing the *Treatise*, Alberti had been particularly impressed by Masaccio's work. In Masaccio's *Expulsion from Paradise*, in the Brancacci Chapel of Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence, for example, the bodies of Adam and Eve stride sturdily out into physical space, their feet meeting solid ground. Their evident shame is now understood through the metaphor of sight itself: Adam covers his eyes, not able to look into the future he has made, not able to meet our gaze; Eve, now aware of being seen, covers her body. The world beyond the fresco, our human world into which they walk and from which they are seen, is implicated within it. Thus it is not merely that these new methods of pictorial organization enable new 'realizations' of biblical themes, but that they are themselves part of a change in the significance of those themes, and thus in a new sense of reality. But at the same time as this new sense of pictorial space opens up new imaginative and projective possibilities, others are closed down. The very homogeneity of pictorial space requires a consistent presentation of temporal and ontological realms. Thus the depiction of supernatural figures or events becomes problematic. In Masaccio's fresco, St

Michael, hounding Adam and Eve into our world, rides quaintly as though on a carpet, in the air above the human figures.

I am suggesting through these observations that the introduction of artificial perspective didn't introduce a more accurate form of perceptual representation, but rather that it opened up new possibilities for the visual representation of thought. This is, of course, not an original claim. It is an application of Panotsky's famous claim that artificial perspective is a 'symbolic form', that perspective rationalized the subjective experience of viewing and thus created the foundation for the development of new worlds of experience (Panotsky, 1991). In particular, Alberti's aim to found the construction of pictorial space on systematic principles concerns the relationships between a rational and lucid order of depiction and a rational and authoritative ordering of social and public affairs. The connections between a clarity and perspicuity of visual organization and a Ciceronian ideal of social order are implicit within the pictorial strategies described in his *Treatise* on painting, explicit in his writings on architecture and connect directly with ideals of civic order underpinning his many other works. For other artists, divergent organizations of pictorial space marry with other socio-political interests, but even then, Alberti's principles, as academic principles, stand as the order to be contraverted.

A perspectival space is a pictorial space in which the ordering of parts making up the content can be made visibly intelligible in particular and distinctive ways, ways that are often transparent to the observer. It is a pictorial space suited to, for example, for ordering the coherence of planes and solids required for Still Life or for the contrasts between proximity and vista required in landscape. Most particularly however, it sets the ground for tableaux of action. Within its stable and ordered space, the actions and tribulations of gods and mortals can be offered to sensual, expressive and psychological scrutiny. In the context of the *Treatise* as a whole, perspective as a method of realistic representation is a means to the end of the realization of thematic purposes in which aesthetic, moral and political elements are interdependent. Alberti's window was to open out into a world governed by a very particular unity of moral and aesthetic order through his account of composition and the *istoria*.

The Grand Work

Although composition is now a very familiar term of painting, Alberti's term *compositio* is very specific, drawing on his alliance between painting and rhetoric. He is applying a Ciceronian term of rhetoric describing how the parts of a sentence are properly built together, and sentences ordered into effective oratory, to painting (see Baxandall, 1971, p. 131). In Book Three Alberti writes, 'I would have those who begin to learn the art of painting do what I see practised by teachers of writing. They first teach all the signs of the alphabet separately, and then how to put syllables together and then whole words. Our students should follow

this method with painting' (1991, p. 89). Teaching someone to write, however, only has point if the person taught is going to have something to say. There is an important shift between being able to form letters and understanding syntax in sentence construction. But it is only when someone has mastered both of these that they can begin to write eloquently or poetically about some subject. In appropriating the models of grammar and rhetoric, however, Alberti is keen to point out that however vivid or persuasive a literary description might be, we should recognize how much more beauty and pleasure can be had from a painting.

Over two hundred years later, the point of Albertian principles of composition in painting were to be well described by Henry Fuseli in his teachings at the Royal Academy:

> Composition, in its stricter sense, is the dresser of Invention, it superintends the disposition of its materials. Composition has physical and moral elements: those are perspective and light with shade; these, Unity, Propriety and Perspicuity; without Unity it cannot span its subject; without Propriety it cannot tell the story; without Perspicuity it clouds the fact with confusion; destitute of light and shade it misses the effect, and heedless of perspective it cannot find a place. (Quoted by Puttfarken, 2000, p. 46. See also, esp., chapter 2)

As Fuseli indicates, composition has a purpose, a grand purpose. It is the visual organization of the content of the work, the *istoria*. *Istoria*, or history painting, that is large-scale narrative painting, was to become the major genre of the academic tradition. Its themes were drawn from biblical and classical sources. Thus in his introduction of the *istoria* as the proper object of the art of painting, Alberti furthered the appropriation of a Classical culture by aligning the teachings of Cicero with the stories of Ovid. Because of its erudite subject matter *istoria* is thus elevated above portraiture and still life, and its status contrasted particularly with genre painting, or subjects from everyday life, which did not have the same thematic depth. By 1669, in the preface to his lectures to the French Academy, André Félibien, was to speak explicitly of the hierarchy of genres. Without the elevating poetic subject of the *istoria*, painting could not assume its 'universal'and 'timeless' authority. Speaking of the *grand style*, in his Fourth Discourse to students of the newly formed Royal Academy of 1769, for example, Sir Joshua Reynolds says 'There must be something either in the action, or in the object, in which men are universally concerned, and which powerfully strikes upon the publick sympathy' (Reynolds, 1959, Discourse IV, p. 75). Although there are obviously deep themes of death, love, courage or betrayal etc. common throughout humankind, one mark of later twentieth-century art or cultural theory has been the rejection of this universalizing humanism. Now we cannot but see how such grand themes are put to the service of specific political and social interests. It was in virtue of this authority, however, that Alberti could claim that the *istoria* has the capacity of moving the soul. This is the source of the idea of the *moral* authority of the Fine Art of painting.

In Book Two of the *Treatise* Alberti writes (again echoing Cicero), 'The *istoria* will move the soul of the beholder when each man painted there clearly shows the movement of his own soul. It happens in nature that nothing more than herself is capable of things like herself: we weep with the weeping, laugh with the laughing and grieve with the grieving' (1966, p. 77). Over two hundred years later, in his *Reflections on the Present State of Painting in France* of 1774, La Font de Saint Yenne was to write, 'Of all the genres of painting, history is without question the most important. The history painter alone is the painter of the soul, the others only paint for the eye' (in Greenhalgh, 1978, p. 205). In taking grand literary themes as the subject matter of a painting however, the artist's originality would not lie in the *invention*, or choice of subject matter, but in the way it is composed. Since the movements of the soul, says Alberti, closely following and adapting Quintilian's teachings on oratory, are made known by movements of the body, he emphasizes the importance of the expressive depiction of bodies. The sad person 'holds himself feebly on his pallid and poor members; in anger, the eyes become swollen with ire, the face and all the members are burned with colour, fury adding so much boldness' (Alberti, 1966, p. 20). He also drew attention to articulating the movements of the body. Practitioner that he was, he speaks of observations he has 'noted from nature', such as that the movements of the head are 'always almost such that certain parts of the body have to sustain it with levers, so great is its weight' (Alberti, 1966, p. 79). The depiction of expressive figures, or of 'the movements of the soul' as they are apparent in bodily movement, became a central theme within French Classicism and the teachings of the French Academy. The painter Charles Lebrun, who played such a major role in establishing the dominance of the French Academy in seventeenth-century Europe, wrote the most influential theoretical treatise on the expression of emotion in grand painting, the *Méthode pour apprendre à dessiner les Passions*, published in 1698. But in much academic or Grand Salon painting, without any subtle conception of the subject, such prescriptive rules about depicting action and emotion in figures easily resulted in hackneyed posturing.

But Alberti was interested in more than dramatic expression, for he wanted the composition to have *decorum*, or fitness and propriety. The deportment and disposition of bodies must be appropriate not only to the action, but to the sex, age and character of action. Thus there is in Alberti's discussion of composition a tension with the guiding principle beauty, for, as he indicates, the aged and ill are not beautiful. But it is also the picture as a whole, its conception of action and its handling of scale, giving sense of place and time, which is a candidate for beauty. Poussin's great paintings, which put human events within the scale of a vast ordered landscape, as if against eternity, bring these ideas to one particular sort of fruition. Poussin himself also derived his compositional principles from musical theory, and specifically included colour in his discussion of the modes of painting. If beauty consists in those qualities of things in terms of which we admire their excellence, then, in the case of paintings, such qualities must be

predicated of the work and the way it realizes its subject, and not just the depicted content.

In choosing the point from which the story is to be depicted, the artist articulates the drama in accordance with his conception of its interests and significance. Yet Alberti's insistence on the internal coherence and unity of the pictorial space and attention to the visual ordering of bodies makes conflict between narratival and pictorial elements endemic. (See Bryson, 1981, chapter 7 for a discussion of the relations between discourse and figure in the context of Diderot's writings about the French Salon painting.) Although the pictorial trope of allegory is one device for dealing with this problem, in trying to achieve narrative and emotional clarity, the visual artist is drawn particularly to those points at which the story is suspended. For example, when something is beheld by the participants in the drama, as when Actaeon first sees Diana, all action is held still. Or when what is not seen by the figures within the work is displayed in full view for the spectator of the picture, as in paintings of Susannah and the Elders. In both of these examples, the woman's body becomes, characteristically, a central motif of the art. Since perspective both brings things into sight and occludes them, then painting can exploit all the possibilities not only of what is near and far, and small and vast, but also of what is occluded or hidden, either from the figures within the picture or from the viewer. Most particularly, however, since painting is a sensory medium, it lends itself to the depiction of sensuous and sensual things, things that hold enchanted attention independently of their role in any narrative subject matter.

The relation of the viewer to what is depicted in any figurative work is of course crucial. Alberti had recommended positioning figures in such a way that they invite the viewer to see what is shown, even by some explicit gesture of pointing. But by the eighteenth century questions of whether and how the viewer is implicated within the fiction of the work had become a pervasive theme. In his substantial work on this subject, Michael Fried discusses Diderot's claims that paintings, which collude with the viewer's presence, become theatrical. 'In Diderot's writings', he says, 'the very condition of spectatordom stands indicted as theatrical, a medium of dislocation and estrangement rather than of absorption, sympathy, self-transcendence; . . . The continued functioning (of both painting and theatre) as major expressions of the human spirit, are held to depend on whether or not painter and dramatist are able to undo that state of affairs, to de-theatricalize beholding and so make it once again a mode of access to truth and conviction' (Fried, 1980, p. 104). In these and other ways the principles of *istoria*, which Alberti laid before the artist as though they gave clear direction, become themselves a troubled topic of theoretical attention.

If aesthetic judgement in painting or drawing is judgement about how a subject or theme is realized, then Alberti's principles of composition open into a tradition in which differences between artistic conceptions of similar subject matter become of central interest of critical attention. The more subtle the conception, the greater the work, hence the acclaim given to Piero della Francesca,

Titian, Poussin or, in response to a modern world, Seurat. Of course the principles of *istoria* also lend themselves to theatrical melodrama or to the moralizing anecdotal painting of Victorian England. How the traditional principles are used or appropriated depends, of course, on the relationships between the art and the culture – art is, after all, one of the ways in which the interests and values of a society are constituted. In the early Modern period, the tradition was challenged in different ways. In some of Manet's paintings, for example, the academic principles are transformed into work which foregrounds its means of depiction and confronts the beholder of the painting with the modern world, without nostalgia or sentiment. Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, or, differently, Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, mark critical turning points of the tradition of *istoria*. But the ethos of this tradition, and the Albertian principles of moral scale that informed it, continued to underpin the authority of much American Abstract painting. However, it possibly reached its point of introversion in the work of so-called postmodernist painters. In Julian Schnabel's ebullient paintings of the 1980s, for example, there is still an heroic scale and some elusive reference to great human themes. But it is a self-referential drama of heroic creativity, drawing on chance cultural references displaced from any wider public concerns. Or, very differently, in Anselm Kiefer's decayed and empty interiors, in work of the 1970s, the vast rooms are vacated of all action and historical memory is corroded. Insofar as there is an End of Painting, then it is this Albertian tradition, which no longer directs contemporary visual imagination, which has come to an end.

Notes

1 Spencer's translation (1966), p. 63. Both Martin Kemp's introduction to the Grayson translation (1991) and Spencer's own introduction give excellent help in reading Alberti's text, and Grayson discusses this particular passage at some length on pp. 18–20.

2 The claim that the art of painting is a gradual progression towards verisimilitude is made in several places by Arthur Danto, particularly *The End of Art* (Danto, 1986, chapter V). He claims that painting was displaced by the advent of different technologies of seeing, such as photography and film, which were able to render reality more fully. But not only do I question this idea of the history of painting as progress towards some single standard of verisimilitude, I also see photography and film as having their own distinctive resources for representation which are not comparable with painting. Thus the idea of an End of Painting indicated at the very end of this chapter is different from that of Danto.

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Chapter 1

The Classical Concept of Mimesis

Göran Sörbom

Fine art is not eternal and constant but culturally dependent. As such it has been produced, described and explained in different ways. Antiquity did not have the concept of Fine Art. Not until the eighteenth century was there such a concept to distinguish Fine Art from other human activities, such as craft or science, and their products. Before that, there were no artistic concepts and no language to describe, explain and interpret the production and uses of works of art in a modern sense. But, of course, people have always made paintings and sculptures, played music and danced, told stories and dramatized them in various ways. But these modes of activity have served in vastly different kinds of situations and have been characterized and understood in many ways, not only as works of art.

When the Greeks of the classical period wanted to characterize the basic nature of painting and sculpture, poetry and music, dance and theatre, i.e. things we today call works of art, most of them agreed that such things were *mimemata* (in singular form *mimema*), the result of an activity they named *mimesis*. Now, what is a *mimema* and what kinds of activity were connoted by *mimesis* according to the ancient outlook?

Traditionally the English word 'imitation' is used, although inadequately, to translate the Greek word *mimesis* and the philosophical discussion of the behaviour denoted by *mimesis* is commonly called 'the theory of imitation'. The theory of *mimesis* was not, however, a well-articulated theory but was rather a fundamental outlook shared by most authors, philosophers and educated audiences in the classical period, in antiquity as a whole, and even later. Neither was there a clear-cut terminological usage. Several words were used more or less synonymously as, for instance, *mimema* (imitation), *eikon* (image), *homoioma* (likeness). But behind this terminological cluster there was, I think, a basic conceptual consensus which will be sketched in this chapter.

The theory of *mimesis* is now generally regarded as the oldest theory of art. But the theory of *mimesis* as we find it in ancient texts is not a theory of art in a modern sense; it is rather a theory of pictorial apprehension and representation.

The basic distinction for the ancient theory of *mimesis* was that between *mimemata* and real things. For example, a house is a real thing whereas a painting or a sculpture representing a house is a *mimema*, a thing which looks like a house but is not a house. And a piece of music which sounds like sorrow is not a real or genuine (expression of) sorrow but just gives the impression of sorrow. The *mimema* as a thing is a sort of vehicle for 'man-made dreams produced for those who are awake', as Plato suggestively formulates it (*Sophist* 266C). Neither the dream nor the *mimema* is a real thing.

Forms of Mental Image (*Aisthesis*)

This basic distinction between *minemata* and real things was commonly accepted far into the eighteenth century when the rise of the modern concept of Fine Art and the establishment of aesthetics as the philosophical clarification of beauty in nature and in the Fine Arts rejected the theory of imitation as inadequate and superficial. When Alexander Baumgarten, as one of the pioneers of this hunt for the real nature of the Fine Arts, suggested the establishment of aesthetics as an intellectual and academic pursuit (*Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (1735), §116), he started from the basic distinction, originally made by the Greek philosophers and the Church fathers, between *aistheta* and *noeta*, i.e. between what we receive from our senses and what the intellect provides us with. Aesthetics should be concerned with sensuous knowledge as logic is concerned with intellectual knowledge. And the Fine Arts were regarded as man's most subtle explorations of the capacities of our higher senses, sight and hearing. The innovation of the eighteenth century was to regard these explorations as goals in themselves (autotely) and to give them an institutional place of their own in western society and culture (autonomy; the 'art world' to use Arthur Danto's modern term).

In the classical period and commonly in the ancient tradition *aisthesis* was described as the processes in which mental images of contingent qualities and shapes of individual things are presented to the mind. When a person sees a house, for instance, there is a mental image of the house in the mind of the perceiver, an image of its colours and shapes. The basic metaphor used to characterize this process was that of pressure. An individual thing presses its contingent qualities and shapes upon the senses like a signet ring which, when stamped into wax, delivers its form but not its matter to the wax. However, when we think 'house' the mind entertains the essence, real nature or the 'houseness of houses' which is something general and not accessible to the senses (*aisthesis*) but only to thought (*noesis*) since thoughts do not have individual and contingent properties.

Mental images could be of different kinds, it was maintained, and were distinguished from each other with regard to vividness, consistency and relation to

the outside world. Perceptions, illusions and hallucinations were counted as different forms of mental image passively received by the perceptual apparatus which in an active state could produce memories, dreams and imaginations as other forms of mental image consisting of contingent properties of individual things.

The Apprehension of *Mimemata* as a Form of *Aisthesis*

When Plato calls pictures 'man-made dreams produced for those who are awake', (*Sophist* 266C) he singles out the apprehension of pictures and *mimemata* as yet another distinct kind of mental image. Looking at or listening to *mimemata* resembles in some respects dreaming. In both cases the perceptual apparatus produces or delivers mental images without there being such things as apprehended by the dreamer and spectator. There is no house pressing its shapes and qualities upon the dreamer's mind nor is there a real house causing the mental image when looking at a picture of a house. But, alternatively, the spectator of the picture is awake, which seems to imply that the viewer or listener is aware that it is a *mimema* and not a real thing that he or she is apprehending. If a person looks at a painting representing a house and believes he or she is looking at a real house, they make a perceptual mistake; they have an illusion and do not look at the picture or *mimema* in a proper way. The apprehension of *mimemata* is also dreamlike in character in the sense that the mental image produced by the *mimema* can be a free combination having no reference to real existing things. In making pictures and *mimemata* the makers are as free as dreamers or persons imagining things to combine elements from the contingent world into objects that do not necessarily have reference to the existing outside world, the centaur being the standard example of this. Imagination (*phantasia*) is the free play of the senses (*aesthesis*).

A difference between dreams and mental images called forth by *mimemata* concerns how they are brought about. Dreams are generated spontaneously in the mind of the dreamer and partly by will when imagining things. But the apprehension of *mimemata* is triggered by external man-made objects and thus intentionally produced. The fact that pictures and *mimemata* are man-made also distinguishes them from 'natural' images such as reflections and shadows, which are made by God or nature (Plato's *Sophist* 265B–266D). Both man-made *mimemata* and natural images require an ability to be apprehended. Philostratus (*The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* II.22) claims that when we see images in the stars, in shadows, and in reflections, the mimetic faculty is activated. Also, looking at paintings and sculptures is dependent on the mimetic faculty: '[T]hose who look at works of painting and drawing require a mimetic faculty; for no one could appreciate or admire a picture of a horse or a bull, unless he had formed an idea of the creature represented.'

Some Basic Properties of *Mimemata* and Pictures According to Ancient Thought

When Plato (*Sophist* 240A–B) tries to define picture (*eidolon*), he maintains that a picture is similar to things of the kind it represents, that it is similar in only some respects, and that it is no more than similar to the things in question. Similarity is, in ancient thought, understood as having properties in common and the idea that individual things and mental images can have properties in common is founded in the belief that perception basically is a kind of impression, a process in which individual objects deliver their individual shapes and qualities, but not their matter, to the mind. Thus, the mental image as a kind of individual impression is similar to the external individual object it represents by having properties in common with it within the range of the relevant sense organ. But a picture, sculpture or *mimema* cannot share all of the properties with the thing represented. If it did, it would not be a representation or *mimema* of that thing but a second example of it (Plato's *Cratylus* 432A–B). Finally, the only function of pictures and *mimemata* is to be similar to a certain extent to the things represented (Plato's *Sophist* 240B). Pictures and *mimemata* are made in order to be seen or heard and thereby produce mental images of individual things they themselves are not. Thus, pictures and *mimemata* are man-made things intended to raise mental images of individual things with their contingent shapes and qualities in the minds of their listeners and spectators. This is their essence or true nature.

Kinds of *Mimemata*

Pictures and likenesses function through their contingent similarities with the kinds of things they represent. The external object *mimema*, however, does not necessarily physically resemble the things it represents. Rather the correct apprehension of it results in a mental image representing something particular and contingent which it in itself is not. The recited words of Homer's *Iliad*, for instance, do not resemble the wrath of Achilles (except when the rhapsode acts direct speech) but, according to ancient thought, call forth mental images of that story in the minds of the listeners, who are aware of the fact that they are listening to a recital and not looking at Achilles himself. Generally, all pictures and likenesses are *mimemata* but not all *mimemata* are pictures or likenesses. Aristotle (*Poetics* chapter 1) distinguishes between kinds of *mimemata* with reference to the medium used, such as words, gestures and movements, shapes and colours, rhythms and sounds, etc. The picture of a landscape functions through its similarities to landscapes we are familiar with, and a poem describing a landscape arouses in the mind of the reader or listener a mental image of a landscape by means of words. As Joseph Addison expresses it (*Spectator*, no. 416, 1712), showing his great indebtedness to ancient thought:

> Words, when well chosen, have so great Force in them, that a Description often gives us more lively Ideas than the Sight of Things themselves. The Reader finds a Scene drawn in Stronger colours, and painted more to the Life in his Imagination, by the help of Words, than by an actual Survey of the Scene which they describe. In this case the Poet seems to get the better of Nature; he takes, indeed, the Landskip after her, but gives it more vigorous Touches, heightens its Beauty, and so enlivens the whole Piece, that the Images which flow from the Objects themselves appear weak and faint, in comparison of those that come from the Expressions.

Both Plato and Aristotle maintain that music is mimetic in character. For example, Aristotle states (*Politics* 1340a17–21) that 'musical times and tunes provide us with images [*homoiomata*, likenesses] of states of character'. When we say 'the piece of music is sad', this means in terms of the theory of *mimesis* that the piece of music generates a mental image of sadness in the listener's mind in a similar way as a painting can represent, i.e. generate a mental image of, a house without being a house.

Knowing that it is not a real expression of sadness makes us react differently when listening to the piece of music than to real expressions of sadness. The same is true about looking at pictures. Knowing that the thing represented in a painting is just a representation and not a real thing makes us react differently. Aristotle writes (in *De anima* 427b23–5) that 'when we form an opinion that something is threatening or frightening, we are immediately affected by it, and the same is true of our opinion that inspires courage; but in imagination we are like spectators looking at something dreadful or encouraging in a picture'. And in the *Poetics* (1448b10–12) he notes that '[o]bjects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and dead bodies'.

Models of *Mimemata*

It is often maintained that the theory of *mimesis* is concerned with the relation between the thing *mimema* and the outside world, i.e. between the *mimema* and individual model or models in the outside world. But what is the model of a *mimema* or, which is the same thing, what is represented in the *mimema* according to the theory of *mimesis*? It can be an individual thing or person. Xenophon relates (*Memorabilia* III.11) how painters used beautiful women as models. But it can also be a memory image. Xenophon tells in another anecdote (*Symposium* IV.21) about a person who was teased because he never had anything else in mind but his beloved. He replied: 'Do you not know that I have so clear an image [*eidolon*] of him in my heart that had I the ability as a sculptor or a painter I could produce a likeness of him from this image that would be quite as close as if he were sitting for me in person.' And Porphyry (*On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of his Books*, 1) describes how a portrait was made in secret of the philosopher Plotinus by a painter who went several times to Plotinus's lectures and used

the composite memory image he thereby created as the model for the painting. Seneca comments on the process of making a sculpture (*Epistulae morales* 65): '[I]t doesn't matter whether he had his model without, to fix his eyes on, or within, a notion conceived and built up in his own brain.'

It is not only individual things and memory images, however, that can serve as models for pictures and *mimemata*. Imagination (*phantasia*) can also produce mental images as models for pictures and *mimemata*. Philostratus maintains (*The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* II.22) that *mimemata* are due to a mimetic faculty which is twofold, namely, the ability to form mental images and the technical skill to convey these mental images into matter. 'Man owes his mimetic faculty to nature, but his power of painting to art [*techne*; skill].' The word *techne* (traditionally translated 'art') signifies the craft involved in the production of *mimemata* and pictures, not the modern Fine Arts as we know them. In general, any human activity founded on practice and experience and put into rules and habits was called *techne* (art), something that could be taught and learnt. Thus, crucial to the production of paintings and sculptures are the mental images which have been produced in the mind of the painter or sculptor: imagination creates mental images of particular things with their sensuous qualities, colours and shapes. In perception the object presses its form without its matter upon the mind of the perceiver and creates thereby a mental image in his or her mind. In a way, the production of pictures and *mimemata* is the reverse order of perception: the skilled hands of the painter or sculptor model the matter to coincide with the mental image. Every craftsman, Alcinous writes (*Isagoga* IX), 'carries the model in himself and conveys its form into matter', and Philo fills in (*De opificio mundi* 4) 'keeping his eyes upon the pattern and making the visible and tangible objects correspond in each case to the incorporeal ideas'.

Finally, authors such as Cicero (*Orator* II.8–10) and Seneca (*Epistulae morales* 65) have claimed that Platonic ideas may serve as models for pictures and *mimemata*. Plato himself denies this vehemently in the *Republic* (598A) with a reference to a clear-cut dualism; things seen cannot be thought and ideas cannot be seen or otherwise apprehended by the senses (*Republic* 507B–C). Although most authors agree that Platonic ideas cannot be grasped by the senses, the conviction that pictures can represent or refer to Platonic ideas has appeared now and then in the history of the theory of *mimesis*, enhancing the value of pictures. The reason for this higher valuation is the fact that the abstract intellectual world was regarded as much more valuable than the fleeting and ever-changing world of the senses, which is the domain of *mimemata*.

The Production of *Mimemata*

Thus, according to ancient thought mimesis was, in a passive sense, the reception of mental images, and in an active sense it was seen as the production (*poiesis*) of objects intended to create mental images in the minds of the perceivers. This

production has two stages: the creation of a mental image (often called *inventio* in the Latin tradition) and the skill to realize the mental image in material form as a painting, or sculpture etc. In the imaginative work, which is the nobler part of the twofold mimetic activity and which is innate, the mind is free to compose units different from things existing in reality. Xenophon stresses (*Memorabilia* III.10) the possibility of choosing elements and putting them together in such a way that the final result will exceed what we normally find in this world. Pliny the Elder relates (*Natural History* XXXV.64) how the painter Zeuxis who, when commissioned to make a painting of a goddess, 'made an inspection of the virgins of the city, who were nude, and selected five in order that he might represent in the picture that which was the most laudable feature of each'. Cicero comments (*De inventione* II.1.1–3) that Zeuxis used this technique '[f]or he did not believe that it was possible to find in one body all the things he looked for in beauty, since nature has not refined to perfection any single object in all its parts'. Horace adds that the combination must also show *decorum*, i.e. follow what is proper (*Ars poetica* 1–37). Painters, sculptors and poets should join in their representations things that fit together. A lion, for instance, is not timid in its behaviour and a king is generous and magnanimous in his appearance. Thus it would be ridiculous to represent a timid lion and a mean king. The typical or ideal of the sort of thing represented in the painting, sculpture or poem should be the goal.

When Maximus of Tyre writes (*Oration* XVII.3) 'Painters gather beauty from every detail of every human body, they collect them artistically (*kata ten technen*) from different bodies into one representation and in this manner they create one beauty which is healthy, fitting and internally harmonised. In reality you would never find a body precisely like a statue, since the arts [*technai*] aim at the greatest beauty', he rules out the use of an individual external object as a model. Thus the *mimema* and picture is not a slavish copy of an external object, something the theory of *mimesis* is often said to imply. The goal of Greek painting and sculpture is, most often, not the realistic representation of actual individuals, rather it is the representation of the idealized human body and soul. Maximus also mentions (*Oration* II.3) the foremost criteria used in judging sculpture: 'The Greeks have recognised that the gods ought to be praised with whatever is most beautiful on earth: pure material, human shape and perfect art [*techne*].' Let us follow the trend of many ancient writers and take Pheidias's Zeus in Olympia as the best example of Greek sculpture: the sculpture was made of gold and ivory, it had the most dignified human form ever made, and Pheidias was in command of the most perfect craftsmanship.

Beauty

Beauty in painting and sculpture was often understood as a commensurability among the parts of the representation as beauty in music was seen as the harmonious relations of intervals and rhythms. In the Pythagorean tradition these

relations could be expressed numerically. Beauty was seldom, however, regarded as the final goal of painting and sculpture, as was claimed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when being beautiful became the basic category in the aesthetic understanding of the world. The most common characterization and evaluation of paintings and sculptures in antiquity was their life-likeness (to *zōtikon*) or vitality. In descriptions of paintings and sculptures they are praised because they show persons represented true to life; only voice or breath is missing, it is said in many literary descriptions. This has been understood as a strong realistic or naturalistic tendency in the Greek audience far from the obvious idealism which we can see in classical Greek sculpture. But the ancient will to life-likeness was not realism or naturalism in a modern sense. It expressed the most fundamental trait of what is called the Greek art revolution, which happened most dramatically around the turn of the century 500 BC. The Greek revolutionary invention at this moment was the technique and skill to represent life and particularly human life in its most obvious potentiality. Life was defined as the interplay between body and soul. The soul was commonly regarded as without contingent properties which made it non-perceptible. Nevertheless it can be represented in paintings and sculptures because the 'works of the soul' can be seen in the living body: a happy person looks different from a sad person and such signs of the presence of soul are capable of representation, Xenophon remarks (*Memorabilia* III.10). So, the claim for lifelikeness was far from a wish for a realistic 'copying of individual things' but a wish to represent man's most valuable property, namely that of being a living body–soul unit. Plotinus writes (VI.7.22): '[Are] not the more lifelike statues the more beautiful ones, even if the others are better proportioned? [. . .] Yes, because the living is more desirable; and this is because it has soul.' The ability to represent the body–soul unit is the remarkable innovation of the classical period which changed the whole history of picture-making and picture-understanding.

Summary

The ancient heritage with regard to the aesthetic field is first of all dependent on the basic distinction between what we know by means of the intellect and by means of the senses. The senses 'inform' us about the individual and contingent qualities of particular things whereas the intellect considers the abstracted and common properties of things: we see and hear the colours, sounds and shapes of things but we understand their common natures by the intellect.

Further, within the field of the senses people have has a mimetic faculty which was understood as the ability to see and hear individual things where no such things are at hand; for instance, you see a house in a painting where there is, in fact, a flat surface painted in different colours. In order to see or hear such things the percipient must be aware of and know that the house seen is a picture and *mimema* of a house and not a real house. If they do not see this they either see a

flat surface with colours or they have an illusion of seeing a house where there is none. In order to see and hear *mimemata* the percipient must be acquainted with things of the kind represented. In order to see that the painting represents a house you must know what kind of things houses are. The mimetic faculty is twofold in nature: every human being has the ability to see or hear *mimemata*, for instance in shadows and reflections in water, but only some persons have learnt the skill and practice (the *techne*) of producing *mimemata*, i.e. 'man-made dreams for those who are awake' in Plato's formulation.

Finally, these man-made dreams can be used in many different ways, for many different purposes and under vastly different circumstances. They appear in religious contexts, they can be used in political propaganda, they serve as entertainment, as educational tools and as pornography. To use them as works of art is a cultural tradition and behaviour with its roots in antiquity and in the theory of mimesis but not developed as a social institution of its own until the eighteenth century.

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Chapter 2

Medieval Art Theory

Hugh Bredin

The two foremost scholars and thinkers of the sixth century AD, Boethius and Cassiodorus, are often regarded as the last representatives of a classical culture that was swiftly dying out in sixth-century western Europe. The so-called 'medieval' period in the Latin West, then, can be defined roughly as the nine centuries between *c*.600 and *c*.1400. Medieval theory of art, however, did not begin seriously until late in the eighth century, when the Carolingian scholars (so-called because of their association with the Emperor Charlemagne) undertook, for the first time in the medieval West, a detailed examination of the nature and role of the visual arts.

Medieval thinkers on every topic were powerfully influenced by their Greek and Roman forebears. In the case of aesthetics and art theory, the principal concepts and theories were inherited from Pythagoras, Plato, the Neoplatonists (Plotinus and the Pseudo-Dionysius), Augustine and Vitruvius. But all of the ideas from these sources, if not already Christian in origin, came to be heavily coloured by Christianity.

Another influence, often overlooked, was the physical survival of classical buildings and artifacts, particularly in Italy and other Mediterranean territories, and the survival of at least some of the skills required to produce them. These were periodically renewed through contacts with Byzantium, and, later, the equally brilliant civilization of Islam. A final, very different, influence came from the artistic motifs imported into the classical world by waves of barbarian invaders from the fifth century onwards.

The Pythagoreans had been the first to suggest that the whole of nature, including works of art, had a mathematical structure. This belief came to have a special significance in the medieval period, for it was consistent with the Christian view that God, creator of the universe, was supremely rational and the source of reason. It was also consistent with the Judaic roots of Christianity, for it could be read in the *Book of Wisdom* (11:21) that God had 'ordered all things in measure, and number, and weight'. God was thus the first and best artist, creator of the richness and beauty of the earth and skies. Human artists were

engaged in work analogous to God's, and used their reason in their work just as God used His.

However, human artists were not the equal of God the supreme artist. Human works of art were products of an inferior or limited human reason, and thus lower in the ontological order than natural objects. This view coincided with what the medievals also read in Plato, whose thinking, mediated through St Augustine and through Neoplatonism, played a major role in medieval thought.

Neoplatonism itself, especially that of the Pseudo-Dionysius, was the biggest single influence on medieval philosophy and theology, up to and even during the Aristotelian revival of the thirteenth century. (Thomas Aquinas, for instance, was as much a Platonist as an Aristotelian.) Plotinus considered art to be a way of reproducing or capturing the beauty and truth of the invisible world in visible form. A work of art was a translation into the material order of the artist's knowledge and understanding, which themselves flowed from the World–Soul and ultimately from the One that is beyond being. Change Plotinus's 'One' to 'God', and we have the Christian Neoplatonism of the fifth-century Pseudo-Dionysius. Again and again throughout the Middle Ages, whatever doubts may have been harboured about art by ascetics and rigorists, its defence lay in the belief that art's beauty and nature's beauty were continuous, and the beauty of both was a revelation, to the senses and the intellect alike, of the divine order.

This theory about the nature of art was reinforced by developments in the visual arts themselves. Already in pre-Byzantine art there had arisen a visual poetics which conceived of pictures as presentations of an ideal, unchanging world of the spirit underlying appearances. As this movement gained strength, perspective and realistic colouring were progressively abandoned in favour of rigid, immobile figures and brilliant colours. The development was well suited to the requirements of Christian iconography, and its characteristic expression was in mosaic. By the sixth century the role of the visual arts was no longer the representation of physical beauty, but that of finding pictorial or sculptural analogues for the life of the spirit.

The Carolingian Renaissance

The Carolingian Renaissance was already well under way before Charlemagne's coronation in AD 800. Charlemagne, ruler of a huge barbarian empire, wanted to restore classical civilization in the West, and to this end gathered around him the foremost Latin (i.e. Western) scholars of the time. One of the written works of the period, of uncertain authorship but known as the *Libri Carolini*, undertook a detailed discussion of the nature and function of visual art. The immediate impetus for this was the Iconoclastic movement in the East.

Iconoclasm, a movement dedicated to the destruction of religious images, arose from a complex mixture of social, cultural, political and religious tensions peculiar to the Byzantine Empire, and was to have a lasting effect on the sub-

sequent history of the visual arts in Judaism and Islam. Christian Iconoclasts had two fundamental beliefs: first, that the widespread practice of venerating religious images was idolatrous (the mental habits of paganism were still prevalent at the time, and the charge of idolatry was sometimes justified); and second, that the very attempt to represent God or any aspect of the divine as a visual image was blasphemous, for it was an insult to God to think that one could represent His nature in material form. Iconoclasm was very powerful both in Constantinople and in the Empire throughout the eighth and ninth centuries, despite the opposition of iconophiles such as John Damascene, and one of its consequences was the almost total destruction of Byzantine religious art up to that time.

Iconoclasm did not have any practical influence in the West; that is, people did not go around breaking religious images. Its intellectual shockwaves were felt none the less, and successive popes were consistent in condemning the movement, on the general ground that images were effective in raising the minds of the faithful to prayerful contemplation of the realities that the images signified. The Second Council of Nicaea, in AD 787, also denounced it. Charlemagne himself was not in the business of placating popes or deferring to Councils, and he supported Iconoclasm to the extent of condemning the practice of venerating images. But the authors of the *Libri Carolini*, whose remit was to criticize and rebut the Council of Nicaea – a task which they carried out with great tenacity – also formulated what amounted to a trenchant apologia for religious art.

Their conclusions were, firstly, that the world of the senses, including visual representations, was intrinsically valuable. It was perhaps inferior to the invisible world of the spirit, but it was a gift from God none the less and should not be rejected or destroyed. Secondly, art had a degree of what we would now call autonomy. That is, a representation could be good or bad as a representation, even if what it represented was immoral or false. Thirdly, art should all the same portray what is true. For a work of art might be good art in its form, but bad art in its content: good because of its representational excellence, bad because of the object represented.

It would quite miss the point to say that the authors were here confusing aesthetic and moral values. The medievals, heavily influenced by Augustinian Platonism, considered that all forms of excellence ultimately united in a transcendental perfection of being. This belief in the unity of all values was a chisel that shaped their artistic and aesthetic judgements. Artistic ugliness was all of a piece, irrespective of whether its proximate source was ineptitude or falsehood.

The Carolingians also debated the social and psychological functions of art, and concluded that they were three in number. It had, firstly, an educational role, for visual representations of incidents in the Bible, and of the lives of the Saints, were a method of instruction for an illiterate populace. Secondly, they were constant reminders of the life of the spirit and the ultimate purpose and destiny of humankind. Thirdly, they adorned the House of God by their beauty.

These three functions constituted the standard justification of the visual arts throughout the Middle Ages. It should be noted that they all take for granted a close connection between art and religion, in subject matter, location and purpose. A more instrumentalist way of putting this would be to say that art was valued primarily for its usefulness to religion. But again, it must be remembered that the assimilation of use to beauty and truth was consistent with the medieval ontology of values. In any case, the essential nature of art was, as the Neoplatonists had said, that it produced in sensuous form a reflection of the divine beauty. It was only natural that art should be used to ornament the worship of a divinity whose beauty shone within it.

The Influence of Vitruvius

Vitruvius (first century BC) wrote a very famous book on architecture, which was a major influence on medieval art theory, both in Carolingian times and thereafter. (Over fifty medieval manuscripts of his *De Architectura* have survived.) The medievals found Vitruvius congenial for several reasons. First, he considered architecture to be a universal art, the one which gathered all the other arts, and indeed all human learning, under its wing. For the medievals, this was one way of validating their practice of bringing all their arts into the House of God: painting, sculpture, stonework, woodwork, ironwork, stained glass, music, eloquence and the poetry of scripture, the richness of vestments and sacred vessels – even, in later centuries, the theatre. Churches were the main public buildings in medieval Europe, and the arts gathered together under their roofs were designed, not just to give God glory, but to do so in a way that expressed the beliefs and affected the sensibilities of entire communities, and indeed of Christendom as a whole.

Vitruvius also wrote about the mathematical basis of architectural symmetry and the importance of geometry for building in general. This once again confirmed the medieval belief that there was a rational, mathematical order in the visible universe. The same mathematical order, Vitruvius claimed, was to be found in the human body, which could thus be taken as a model for architecture. The head was one-eighth the height of the body, the foot one-sixth, the forearm one-fourth. 'The other limbs also have their own proportionate measurements. And by using these, ancient painters and famous sculptors have attained great and unbounded distinction' (Vitruvius, III, 1). So too in architecture, the mathematical relations among the parts were essential to their design.

These views resonated with one of the Neoplatonic elements in medieval cosmology, the belief that everything in the created world was structurally analogous with everything else. Microcosm and macrocosm, part and whole, earth and sky, animate and inanimate, were bonded in a universal analogy of all things. Thus, the construction of a political order analogous to the human body, as in John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, or of a cathedral analogous in its internal

symmetries to the human body, or of pictures and sculptures that observed the correct mathematical proportions, were simply ways of ensuring that what human beings manufactured was in conformity with the universal, and divinely ordained, order of nature. Art should always fit in with nature. As Aquinas put it, expressing here a standard medieval view, *Ars imitatur naturam in sua operatione* [Art imitates the activity of nature] (*Summa Theologiae*, I, 117, 1c).

The theory of art and the aesthetic that emerged in the ninth century remained unchanged, in its essential outlines, for the remainder of the medieval period. But from time to time various thinkers, and various schools of thought, explored various aspects of it in greater detail. In the end this generated a large corpus of writing on art and beauty, much of it retrieved from obscurity and discussed in Edgar de Bruyne's monumental *Etudes d'esthétique médiévale* (1946).

The Cluniac Reform

The Carolingian Renaissance did not survive beyond the ninth century. Even before the century ended, widespread political and economic instability led to a dispersal of the Carolingian intellectuals, and to a serious loss of momentum in cultural life. Yet it was in the year 910 that a new monastery was founded at Cluny, in Burgundy, under the Benedictine rule, which was to have far-reaching effects upon the preservation of learning and upon the arts. Under a series of remarkable Abbots its ideals, in particular its commitment to a life of prayer, work and learning, spread across western Europe, even as far as Poland and Scotland, in a loose confederation of monastic houses – over a thousand at its peak – constituting a so-called *Ordo cluniacensis*. Its influence spread also to other monastic orders, and to religious life in general.

The Cluniac movement eventually led to the building of new churches on a large scale, all in the Romanesque style. The monks at Cluny also revived the practice of adorning churches with sculptures; these were characterized at first by the static, context-free style of representation used in illuminated manuscripts, but they soon came to achieve a high degree of three-dimensional realism. They also incorporated into their sculpture something of the mysticism of numbers. Thus, one might find a sculptural arrangement based upon the number four: four evangelists, four cardinal virtues, four rivers of paradise, four seasons. The medievals were fond of adopting constraints of this kind – also geometrical constraints, such as fitting a fresco or bas-relief into a square, triangular or semi-circular space – and greatly prized the virtuosity required to work within them.

It was at this time also that medieval artists began to develop in earnest an extensive repertoire of visual symbols. Animals, flowers, insects, birds and plants signified particular persons and incidents, virtues and vices, parables and tales from Scripture. The dove stood for Noah, for peace, for the Holy Ghost, for the Purification. The lamb stood for Christ, and for St Agnes. The thistle stood for

earthly sorrow, the vine for the Church of God. St Peter was represented holding keys or a fish, St Paul with a sword or a scroll of his Epistles. It was a very extensive iconology indeed, which gave symbolic values to every kind of creature, to earth and sky (clouds symbolized the unseen God), to artifacts, colours, letters, numbers, modes of dress, shapes and just about anything that could be represented visually.

The emergence of this visual symbolism can be explained by two factors. One was the medieval belief, already referred to, in a universal analogy of all things. In such a perspective, there is nothing strange in finding a resemblance between a plant and a virtue, a bird and a Saint, a colour and an emotion. The signifiers, to put it in contemporary language, were motivated, not arbitrary. It was felt to be a 'natural' language, not a conglomeration of ciphers decodable only by those who had learned their meanings. The other factor was the need, taken for granted in medieval times, to make visual art accessible and intelligible to everyone. It was intended to instruct and educate, and the visual symbols informed the populace, far more than a title would have done, what was going on in the picture and what moral law or dogma was represented or could be learned from it.

It was, at any rate, a visual semantic deeply rooted in the cultural beliefs and imperatives of the medieval period, and it was tenacious enough to survive far beyond it, right through the Christian art of the Renaissance. If we try to experience this art without knowing the visual iconology that it incorporates, we miss one of its essential features, and fail to make imaginative contact with the sensibilities of the people for whom it was intended.

The Twelfth-Century Renaissance

Medievalists sometimes talk of a 'twelfth-century Renaissance', and it was, in fact, an immensely creative time in western Europe. It witnessed a flourishing of the Schools that were shortly to develop into Universities, a speeding up in the recovery and translation of ancient texts, the beginnings of a division between philosophy and theology, and a powerful impetus towards the systematization of all knowledge. In architecture, and the associated arts, it saw the replacement of Romanesque by Gothic. So far as art theory and aesthetics are concerned, it is customary to mention three important twelfth-century Schools: the Victorines, the School of Chartres and the Cistercians.

The Augustinian Abbey of St Victor, situated just outside Paris, was home to Hugh of St Victor and Richard of St Victor. Both of them were in the Neoplatonic tradition that envisaged a smooth and continuous movement in human experience from matter to spirit to the ineffable Godhead, with beauty running like a golden thread through it all. Richard of St Victor examined in detail the ascent of the soul from an *admiratio rerum* to an ultimate state of mystical exultation. Hugh of St Victor concentrated more on the analysis of material beauty. Beauty in nature, and beauty in the arts – whose purpose it was to complete

and perfect nature – was a figure or symbol of divine beauty. It was of many different kinds, involving all of the senses, not just sight and hearing. But all had the function of drawing the mind towards its creator, for they were 'like a book written by the finger of God' (*Didascalicon*, VII, 3). This Victorine belief, that art could be an instrument for achieving mystical experience, is unique in western Europe, although some might say that there are distant echoes of it in Wordsworth, and perhaps in the Romantic movement in general.

One of the most significant of the twelfth-century Schools, second only to Paris, was the School of Chartres. It was the first of the medieval Schools to introduce Aristotle's hylomorphic theory – the theory that bodies are constituted of prime matter and substantial form – although it was a hylomorphism interpreted in the light of Plato. Plato's *Timaeus* was in fact the text that mainly defined the intellectual tradition in Chartres, and it is therefore not surprising that its aesthetics was 'Timaeic' in character as well. It rested, that is, upon the axiom, ultimately Pythagorean in origin, that the world was created in accordance with mathematical laws, from which it derived order, harmony and beauty. The metaphor of God as an architect or artist presupposed that human works of art obeyed the same principles, that they were the products of knowledge, including mathematical knowledge, as well as of manual skill. This conception of art, as an activity both cognitive and manual, was inherent in the theocentric outlook of the medievals, and was constantly repeated throughout the Scholastic period.

One of the earliest of the great Gothic structures was the Cathedral at Chartres. It was the Cistercians, however, who were principally responsible for the spread of Gothic across Europe. At first sight they seem unlikely as architectural innovators, for it was part of the Cistercian outlook, due largely to the charismatic, and at times curmudgeonly, Bernard of Clairvaux, that ostentation, luxury and unnecessary adornment were to be avoided in the conduct of the monastic life. Bernard was particularly exercised by the ornateness of Cluniac churches, and wrote a celebrated diatribe against it in his *Apologia ad Guillelmum*.

Cistercian churches should, in view of this, have been plain and austere structures, and in one sense they were, as they did not contain any painting or representational sculpture. However, stained glass *was* allowed, and Cistercian architects excelled at this typically medieval art form. In addition, deprived as they were of the indulgence of intricate carvings and ornamentation, they concentrated instead upon an austere purity of line and proportion. Perfect proportion came to be a mark and a legacy of the Cistercian style of Gothic, and so an excellent example for architects everywhere.

The Cistercian aesthetic, based upon an unadorned purity of line, figure and volume, with a limited use of texture and colour, stood at one pole of the medieval aesthetic sensibility. The other pole was spectacularly represented by another twelfth-century figure, Suger, Abbot of St-Denis, who has been made known to a wider than usual audience by Erwin Panofsky. Suger's own account

of the reconstruction of the church at St-Denis has survived (Suger, 1946), and it incorporates virtually all aspects of the medieval aesthetic sensibility. Suger subscribed, naturally enough, to the metaphysics of Neoplatonism, particularly the metaphor of light characteristic of the Pseudo-Dionysius. This exactly matched the artistic instincts that he possessed anyway, and his account of his new basilica is filled with references to how the rich and glowing materials shone with the light of a higher world.

Scholasticism

The Scholastic period – roughly the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries – was characterized by the desire, already emerging in the twelfth century, to construct a complete and systematic account of God, man and nature. As the century progressed, another important factor entered into play, for several of Aristotle's works, translated by William of Moerbeke and others, and hitherto unknown or ignored, joined the canon of philosophy. This led to attempts to assimilate Platonist with Aristotelian thought, a goal that was achieved most fully by Thomas Aquinas.

Unfortunately, the Scholastic philosophy of art differs very little from what had gone before. It is unfortunate because we cannot help wondering how different it might have been if the Scholastics had read and assimilated Aristotle's *Poetics*. No one really knows why they did not. An abridged version of the *Poetics* was available for most of the thirteenth century, and William of Moerbeke produced a complete translation in 1278. Yet it seems to have been ignored by the Scholastic thinkers, unknown to people like Dante and Boccaccio, and ignored or unknown even throughout the *quattrocento*.

However, some of the Scholastic philosophers wrote a great deal about beauty, and some of this is of relevance to the theory of art as well. The greatest of the Scholastics, Bonaventure and Aquinas, spoke of the beauty of visual images in terms of their sensuous and mimetic properties. Bonaventure wrote, 'An image is called beautiful when it is well drawn. It is also called beautiful when it represents its object well' (*Comm. in I Sententiae*, 31(pars 2), 1, 3 ad2). Aquinas wrote, 'An image is called beautiful if it perfectly represents something, even something ugly' (*Summa Theologiae*, I, 39, 8c).

Two things are notable here. Firstly, artistic beauty is not explained as a material reflection of a divine or invisible beauty, but instead as a property of material objects produced by human skill. Secondly, both of them seem to subscribe to something like artistic realism. This is not an art that attempts to capture the spiritual in the material, but an art that captures the essence of one material object (the object represented) in another material object, the picture or sculpture. The art of the thirteenth century had come a long way from the art of Byzantium. Perhaps without fully realizing it, Bonaventure and Aquinas were describing the visual art of their own time, not only as it actually was – that is,

an art striving for realism – but also, and even more significantly, as it appeared to them in their own sense experience – that is, an art enjoyed for its innate properties of truth and beauty, not its reference to a transcendent realm of the ideal and the divine. At this point in the medieval period it was not just art that was changing, but people's sensibilities as well.

Artists and Chroniclers

If we want to study the theory of art in the late medieval period, we should not overlook the artists themselves, nor descriptions of their work by their contemporaries. The medievals were always given to producing handbooks on the visual arts, with detailed instructions on how to grind pigments and mix paints, how to prepare a wall for a fresco and the like. We also possess descriptions of artists' works by various chroniclers. The vast majority of the handbooks contain no art theory whatsoever, and the descriptions for the most part give purely factual details about materials, size and cost. But occasionally some incidental remarks throw light upon the artistic culture of the time. As early as the eleventh century we find Leo of Ostia marvelling because 'one would believe that the figures in the mosaics were alive' (Holt, 1981, p. 13) – and this almost two centuries before the artistic realism implicit in Bonaventure and Aquinas. In the thirteenth century a remarkable sketch book and manual by Villard de Honnecourt states that he had drawn a lion from life (Holt, 1981, p. 91). A document listing the Articles of Masonry, probably dating from the thirteenth century, states that 'no man can bring to an end so well the work begun by another' (Holt, 1981, p. 103) – an early adumbration of the concept of individual genius, and so a clear departure from the belief, never far from the medieval mind, that art was a matter of following the right rules.

These propositions and practices – drawing from life, mimetic realism, the individual genius of the artist – did not, therefore, suddenly spring into being with the Renaissance, but were established long before the end of the middle ages. Villard's sketches also illustrate his conviction that drawings of people and creatures should conform to geometrical patterns. This was entirely in keeping with the medieval view that both objects and representations of objects were constructed in accordance with mathematical rules. Panofsky has pointed out, however, that the lines inscribed by Villard on top of his drawings of faces and bodies, ostensibly to demonstrate their mathematical structure, are not derived from any specific mathematical principles. When looked at critically they turn out to be as impressionistic as the drawings themselves (Panofsky, 1970a, pp. 112–16).

Cennino Cennini (*c.*1370–1440) is usually regarded as a key transitional figure straddling the medieval and Renaissance periods. His *Il libro dell'arte* is another practical manual in the medieval style. But here and there we find remarks which were as much at home in the fourteenth century as in the Renaissance: for

instance that painters learn their craft by drawing from nature; that painting is the equal of theoretical knowledge; and that the painter is free to use his imagination as he will (Cennini, I, 1).

The artistic spirit of the late Middle Ages is perhaps most evident in a description of how Duccio's great altarpiece was carried from his studio to the cathedral in Siena. It was, according to one eyewitness, a great civic event. All the shops were shut, and a procession of priests, friars and townspeople accompanied the altarpiece, with candles in their hands, 'all the bells ringing joyously, out of reverence for so noble a picture as is this' (Holt, 1981, p. 135). In view of this, it is not surprising to find Cennini writing that painting should be enthroned next to theory, that it is the equal of poetry and that it discovers things not seen. With Cennini the medieval period, so far as the visual arts were concerned, came to an end and the Renaissance began. More accurately, in Cennini we find that the two periods flow seamlessly together.

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Chapter 3

Neoplatonist Aesthetics

Suzanne Stern-Gillet

The Neoplatonist School flourished in late antiquity during the third and fourth century AD and lasted until the alleged closure of the School at Athens by Justinian in AD 529. Although its members described themselves as Platonists, posterity recognized their doctrinal originality by coining the term 'Neoplatonists' to classify them. Beside Plotinus (204/5–70), a major figure in the history of philosophy, the School claims such notable thinkers as Numenius, Porphyry, Iamblichus and Proclus. Its influence on both the Christian and Moslem worlds was wide-ranging, profound and prolonged. Although channelled at first through eclectic Aristotelian commentators, the philosophy of Plotinus, like other forms of Platonism, was 'rediscovered' during the Renaissance. Mainly through Marsilio Ficino's (1433–99) translations of Plotinus and Pico della Mirandola's (1463–94) theoretical writings, Neoplatonism then re-entered Western consciousness and gave a new impetus to the sciences and the arts. As for Plotinus's substantive theory of beauty, it had so pervasive an influence on the development of modern aesthetics and art theory that those who are most indebted to it often fail to recognize the extent of their debt. For this reason, and because the richly systematic nature of Plotinus's thought makes it virtually impossible to examine any of its parts in isolation from its context, it is appropriate here to start with a brief survey of his philosophy.

In so far as ancient Greek thought was driven by the search for a singular principle capable of explaining the ever-changing diversity of the world of sense, it viewed unity as a necessary condition of intelligibility and, in some cases, of reality. In this, it found its last, and purest, expression in Plotinus's system. That this should be so is somewhat paradoxical since Plotinus, who may have been Egyptian, studied in Egypt, took more than a passing interest in Eastern mysticism, and spent his teaching life in Rome. A mysterious and reticent figure, Plotinus is presented as a sage by Porphyry, his pupil, biographer and the editor of his writings. Rather than editing the works of Plotinus in the chronological order of composition, Porphyry grouped them in six thematic groups of nine tractates (or enneads).

In Plotinus's monistic system the order of intelligibility follows the order of being. While the procession of realities from the One to the world of sense describes a metaphysical process, the movement of conversion, which can lead the individual soul to the immediate apprehension of the higher principles, presents a model of intellectual and spiritual development.

Plotinus's account of reality, physical and metaphysical, proceeds by means of a hierarchy of three principles, viz., in descending order from unity to diversity, the One, the Intellect and the Soul. Each principle constitutes the timeless and immaterial ontological parent and the model for, as well as the destination of, the reality (or hypostasis) that is emanated from it. Thus, by an eternal, continuous and necessary process which leaves the parent principle unaltered, the One emanates Intellect which emanates Soul which, in turn, produces and in-forms matter. Effectively erecting the criterion of intelligibility into his ultimate metaphysical principle, Plotinus ranks unity above being and identifies the One with the source of being and the font of all value. The One, he held, is beyond form, determinacy and thought since the ascription to it of any substantive quality or property would introduce limitation and plurality into a principle that is all-embracing and unitary. In its perfection, the One overflows eternally and sends out a product which differs from it, yet remains as close to it as a ray of light to its source or an image (*eikôn*) to its original. As these metaphors indicate, the product is inferior to its source – perfect unity eludes it. Yet it yearns for the perfection of its cause and turns to it in contemplation. In this movement of conversion, the product becomes aware of itself as a separate and hence determinate and limited reality which Plotinus calls Intellect and presents as the realm of the Forms and the intelligible model of the world of sense. Plotinian Forms, which share some important features with Plato's Ideas, are not the products of so many separate acts of creation on Intellect's part, but must be viewed rather as its manifestations, themselves thoughts or intelligences, organically linked to one another and to their source, and each reflecting the whole as well as apprehending it in timeless contemplation. Forms and Intellect constitute a differentiated unity which has substantive properties such as being, life and beauty. In this first stage of emanation, otherness, plurality and diversity are introduced into the metaphysical universe.

In the second stage of emanation, structurally similar to the first, Intellect gives rise to Soul, the third and last principle in the Plotinian intelligible universe. An 'expressed thought' or 'image' of the Intelligible Principle, Soul, too, turns towards its source. In this process, it contemplates the Intelligibles and gains awareness of itself while generating the great multiplicity of the world of sense. More diverse than its source, this hypostasis enfolds within itself different manifestations, or kinds, of soul, to which correspond the stages of its descent into body. While the World–Soul, as a discarnate entity, remains in the Intelligible realm, the souls of heavenly bodies, the soul called nature because it gives and sustains life, as well as the individual souls of sentient beings, are stages in the descent of Soul into body and its corresponding estrangement from its

ontological source. At each level Soul projects onto lower instantiations of itself, images and reflections of the Forms that it succeeds in apprehending. Such simulacra inevitably get more insubstantial as Soul gets more engrossed in body. At the ultimate point of its fall, Soul produces matter, indefinite and lifeless, which Plotinus equates with nonbeing, evil and ugliness. As he conceives it, the world of sense is eternally caused to exist by the interaction of the being of Soul and the nonbeing of matter.

Plotinus's aesthetic terminology is ample and varied, and the concept of beauty is central to his philosophy. The two tractates that he devoted to it, i.e. I.6 (On Beauty) and V.8. (On Intelligible Beauty), first and thirty-first respectively in the chronological order of writing, evidence the continuity of his reflections on the matter. Since the Renaissance, these tractates, the most widely read of the corpus, have exerted a significant influence on both the Fine Arts and art theory.

Plotinus's concept of beauty is conveniently approached through the distinction between matter and body. Unlike its Platonic counterpart, Plotinian matter cannot function as nurse and receptacle for the demiurgic action of Soul since it is absolute nonbeing and, as such, impassible. Only transitory, unstable reflections of Soul and its intentional objects in Intellect can come to rest on matter once it has been configured by Soul. As theorized by Plotinus in opposition to the Gnostics, corporeality is not to be despised as unworthy and ugly since the agency of Soul causes it to bear the imprint of the Intelligible Principle. Indeed, it is by participating in Form that the things of this world acquire whatever shadowy beauty they are capable of receiving: 'the Form, then, approaches and composes that which is to come into being from many parts into a single ordered whole . . . for since it is one itself, that which is shaped by it must also be one as far as a thing can be which is composed of many parts' (I.6.2). Plotinus's theorization of sensible beauty as a move away from the indefiniteness of matter towards the relative unity and simplicity of Soul led him to assimilate beauty to unity, and hence to reality, since his ontology is based on the principle of unity (V.8.9). To the phantasm of beauty which adorns the sense world Plotinus contrasts the real beauty of Soul in all its manifestations and the even purer and more real beauty of Intellect and the Forms: 'First the soul will come in its ascent to intellect and there will know the Forms, all beautiful, and will affirm that these, the Ideas, are beauty; for all things are beautiful by these, by the products of Intellect and essence' (I.6.9). Rather than having beauty, Intellect *is* beauty and its beauty can only be apprehended in a single, all-embracing act of intellectual vision in which beholder and beheld become identical. Totally devoid of sensible matter and therefore free from the limitations imposed by space, mass and size, the Forms in Intellect '. . . are all together and each one again in a position without separation, possessing no perceptible shape – for if they did, one would be in one place and one in another, and each would no longer be all in himself' (V.8.9). The beauty of Intellect, in turn, comes from the One, and Plotinus, who

often refers to the One as the Good, occasionally calls it also supreme beauty (in, for example, VI.7.32 and 33).

Such a metaphysical concept of beauty carries consequences for aesthetics, and Plotinus explicitly drew some of them. Against the Stoic view that beauty consists in good proportions and harmony, he claimed (I.6.1) that the single and the simple, too, could have beauty. From his view that discarnate Forms are more beautiful than their reflections in the world of sense, he inferred that the Form in the artist's mind is aesthetically superior to the empirical artwork: being 'divided by the external mass of matter' (I.6.3), the latter cannot achieve the purity and unity of the former. In locating the work of art proper in the mind of the artist, who apprehends intelligibles directly (V.8.1), Plotinus prefigured the theories of idealist aestheticians such as B. Croce and R. G. Collingwood, although there is no concrete evidence of Plotinus's direct influence upon either philosopher. Lastly, the ontological gap that he posited between art and world led Plotinus to dissociate himself from Plato's criticism of some art forms as imitations twice removed from reality. Far from being constrained by the world of sense, mimetic artists can, in Plotinus's estimation, make their creation reflect Form more faithfully than their model: 'the arts do not simply imitate what they see, but they run back to the forming principles from which nature derives; . . . they do a great deal by themselves, and, since they possess beauty, they make up what is defective in things' (V.8.1). Thus, he held, the sculptor's vision need not be restricted by the imperfections of the sensible world; borrowing an example from Cicero (*Orator*, II.8–III.9), he asserted that Phidias 'did not make his Zeus from any model perceived by the senses, but understood what Zeus would look like if he wanted to make himself visible' (V.8.1). As a result, and contrary to what Plato appears to have thought while writing book X of the *Republic*, the arts, in Plotinus's estimation, need not distract the prisoners in the cave and, in so doing, keep them bound; on the contrary, artworks inspired by the Intelligibles present in the artist's mind can direct the soul upwards and, like the Egyptian hieroglyphics which Plotinus misunderstood but admired, enable the beholder directly to apprehend the realities imaged in the work (V.8.6).

Yet, for all his defence of, and influence upon, the arts, Plotinus did not have an aesthetics in the modern sense of the term. To start with, he so extended the concept of beauty as to render it practically unfit for the judgement of taste as such. Indeed, in his cosmology, the province of beauty, which extends over both evaluative and descriptive matters, includes the outcome of the formative action of Nature *qua* manifestation of Soul as well as all art forms, the products of craft and technique (such as weaving and carpentry) as well as moral entities (such as virtues and ways of life). Within this vast class, Plotinus did not circumscribe a subclass for aesthetic excellence or artistic merit. What, then, did he conceive the aesthetic criterion to be? If the cosmos is the product of Soul which shapes matter, and if sensible beauty cannot but be a reflection of the higher world, does it follow that, according to Plotinus, the condition of being in-formed

constitutes a sufficient as well as a necessary condition of beauty? This conclusion seems inevitable. Yet, if this criterion could conceivably enable us to assess the excellence of artworks, could it similarly help us in the case of, for example, landscapes or human faces? Plotinus never discussed natural beauty, save for defending it against the Gnostics (II.9), but he did ponder over human beauty, and his remarks on the matter show the depth of his axiological objectivism. Distinguishing outward beauty, which may be in the eye of the beholder, from true beauty, which comes from the soul within and is inseparable from the moral life, Plotinus repeatedly urges his reader to hurry away from the 'surface bloom' of bodies to the realities which they image.

Plotinus lived what he preached. Being, in the words of Porphyry, 'ashamed to be in the body', he steadfastly refused to sit for his portrait. Although he recognized that a painting can be more beautiful than what it represents, he maintained that it is usually the other way round: 'Are not the more lifelike statues the more beautiful ones, even if the others are better proportioned? And is not an uglier man more beautiful than the beautiful man in a statue?', he asked rhetorically, before answering, 'Yes, because the living is more desirable; and this is because it has soul; and this is because it has more the form of the good; and this means that it is somehow coloured by the light of the Good, and being so coloured wakes and rises up and lifts up that which belongs to it, and as far as it can makes it good and wakes it' (VI.7.22). Sharing in the being of Intellect in so far as they are ensouled, living human bodies derive their transient aesthetic value from the eternal realities from which they proceed. In Plotinus's system, aesthetic values are not autonomous.

The nature and extent of Plotinus's influence on the visual arts, either directly or through the medium of art theory, has long been a matter for study and speculation. Because it is mostly undocumented, it cannot be assessed with any amount of precision, and art historians would be well advised to proceed with caution. Yet new developments in art, at least in two periods in history, coincided with the spread, or resurgence, of Neoplatonism. In those cases, rather than leave matters unexplained, it is warranted cautiously to proceed on the assumption that practice was influenced by theory. The first high point of Neoplatonist influence on the arts was the development, in the fourth century AD, of a specifically Byzantine aesthetics, as expressed mainly in paintings and mosaics, which dominated northern Italy and the eastern Mediterranean until the fall of Byzantium in 1453. Characteristic of this tradition is the device known as inverted perspective, in which the most important figure – divinity, saint or king – is depicted as taller than those on either side of him and is placed in the centre of the picture with, more often than not, a golden, unmodulated and shadowless background. These hieratic figures are flattened and slightly elongated, they are depicted full-frontally, and their uniformally directed gaze points in the far distance. As aptly summed up by Wind, Byzantine art 'dematerializes' its personages. Most of its characteristic features match identifiable tenets of the philosophy of the *Enneads*, i.e. the primacy and transcendence of the One, the procession of the hypostases,

the spacelessness of Intellect, the abjection of matter, and gold as a paradigm of indivisible beauty. To the extent that the paintings of El Greco share some features with the Byzantine style, it has been claimed that he, too, underwent Plotinus's influence. Yet, the evidence for this claim, both in terms of doctrinal contact and aesthetic closeness, is practically nonexistent; El Greco, a cultured man who read Aristotle, did not even possess the works of Plato, let alone those of Plotinus.

In so far as early Christian art, from the fall of Rome to the High Middle Ages, shares features with Byzantine art, it, too, can be claimed to have Neoplatonist roots, which André Grabar has famously traced to Plotinus's theory of perception. In Plotinus's answer to the problem as to how distant objects appear small – since the forms of individual parts do not reach us, he held, we lack the unit of reference which would allow us correctly to size up the whole (II.8.1) – Grabar identifies the origin of early Christian artists' detailed depictions of personages on an even plane, and in uniformly flat, unmodulated tones. In Plotinus's contention that sense perception occurs in the object rather than in the soul (IV.6.1), Grabar sees the theoretical counterpart of radial perspective, characteristic of this style, which drives the beholder to the centre of the image and incorporates him within it. As is the case in Plotinus's intellectual, nondiscursive, vision, radial perspective lessens the constraints of space, makes possible otherwise unrealistic interpenetrations of figures, and allows beholder and object to be fused in unity. Cognition then is as immediate as it is total. Such ideological concordance between Plotinus and early Christian art is paradoxical in view of the philosopher's lack of sympathy with Christianity.

The Renaissance in Italy proved to be also a renaissance for Neoplatonist aesthetics as the large number of contemporary treatises on the history, theory and practice of the plastic arts testifies. The impetus was famously given by Marsilio Ficino who, under the patronage of Cosimo de' Medici, founded the Academia Platonica at Careggi near Florence in 1462 with the express aim of reviving the Platonic tradition. This, he most signally achieved through his translation into Latin of Plato's dialogues and Plotinus's *Enneads* as well as of a number of works by Plotinus's pagan and Christian pupils. Most significant and influential amongst his exegetical works is his *De Amore*, an extensive and highly dynamic commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, in which great reliance is placed on the allegorical mode of expression. Replete with allusions to, and quotations from, Plotinus's two tractates on beauty, this commentary reveals the extent of Ficino's allegiance to Neoplatonist philosophy in general and its concept of beauty in particular. Although a self-professed Platonist, Ficino was also familiar with Scholastic Aristotelianism as well as with various strands of ancient and oriental mysticism, magic and astrology. The fact that, in addition, he was a priest whose sincere and serious commitment to the Church cannot be doubted, makes him one of the most syncretist thinkers in the history of Western philosophy. Indeed, the specifically Neoplatonist elements in Ficino's system are difficult to disentangle from the generically Platonic structure in which they are embedded,

a fact which may well account for the otherwise regrettable tendency of many a historian of aesthetics to dub Neoplatonist any revival of Plato's aesthetics, whether Plotinian in inspiration or not.

Ficino Christianized the Neoplatonist hierarchy of ontological levels of perfection, reinterpreting Plotinus's One as God and the Intelligible Principle as the Angelic Mind, and he repeated the theorization of love as the attraction felt by each of the lower levels for the beauty or perfection of its hypostatic source. In so far as true beauty is transcendent, the immediate attraction of the sense world is therefore best resisted, he held in the *De Amore*, and the true lover is he who, discarding the ephemeral and the manifold, strives to behold perfect and enduring beauty. Yet, earthly love is not entirely to be disparaged since the forming action of Soul has endowed the phenomenal world with grace, and radiant images of the higher world are to be found in it. Correspondingly, ugliness is accountable in terms of matter's resistance to the various formative principles, which, ultimately, emanate from the divine source.

Although Ficino himself did not directly engage either with the arts or with aesthetics, the concept of beauty which he derived from Neoplatonism provided a metaphysical anchor for the arts of his time, and, in Italy and elsewhere, dominated practice and theory long after the close of the cinquecento. The most notable, if not the most immediate, effects of the rapid spread of his version of Neoplatonism are briefly described below. A seminal study of this tradition in its successive stages is to be found in Erwin Panofsky's 1924 highly discursive *Idea*. Other accounts, equally sophisticated but less influential, are listed in the bibliography.

As filtered through Ficino's syncretist system, Plotinian views on beauty and nature discouraged painters and sculptors from naturalism, promoting instead allegorization and idealization, in a trend that was to last well into the eighteenth century. Thus a number of famous paintings by such younger contemporaries of Ficino's as Giorgione (the *Concert Champêtre* and the *Tempest*) and Dürer (*Melencolia*), and later artists such as Arcimboldo (*Capricci*), lend themselves to allegorical interpretations, in which Neoplatonist notions often figure prominently. More significantly, Florentine Neoplatonism led many a Renaissance, Mannerist and even Neoclassical artist to view the function of art as the improvement, rather than the copy, of nature. As they conceived it, their task was to attempt and reproduce the creative activity of the divine artisan and to make their work reflect the intelligible Forms or Ideas more clearly than could be effected in bodily nature. The practical implications of this view are drawn in Raphael's (1483–1520) famous statement: 'In order to paint a beauty I would have to see several beauties, but since there is a scarcity of beautiful women, I use a certain Idea that comes to my mind'. As evidenced in Bernini's (1598–1680) portraits, not even this least theory-driven of artistic genres was, at that time, immune to the antinaturalism derived from the Neoplatonist otherworldly concept of beauty. Correspondingly, all manner of ugliness tended to be ascribed to corporeality or matter, conceived as absence, obstacle to form, and limit to artistic cre-

ation. Poussin's remarks on this point, recorded in the chapter devoted to his life by Bellori in *Le Vite de' Pittori, Scultori e Architetti Moderni*, testify to the lasting influence of Plotinus's entirely negative view of matter.

The view that artists can and should improve on nature by first turning inwards and beholding intelligible Forms of Ideas supposes that the practice of art and the theory of philosophy go hand in hand. And indeed, the dominance of Neoplatonist aesthetic ideals in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had also an impact on contemporary writings on art, which became less practical and historical and more theoretical. Although Vasari's (1511–74) famous *Lives of the Artists* had been replete with Neoplatonist aesthetic predicates such as 'animated', 'lifelike' and 'graceful', it soon gave way to such avowedly theoretical, philosophical even, works such as Lomazzo's (1538–1600) *Idea del Tempio della Pittura*, and Bellori's (1615–96) *L'Idea del Pittore, dello Scultore e dell'Architetto*. The former became a manual for the Mannerist movement while the latter spelt out the theory of Neoclassicism and paved the way for the reinterpretation of the Neoplatonist concept of Idea as, in Winckelmann's famous phrase, the *beau idéal*. Philosophical aesthetics was in the making.

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Chapter 4

Renaissance Art Theories

François Quiviger

The period ranging from the late Middle Ages to the early seventeenth century produced a distinct literature devoted to the history, criticism and interpretation of the visual arts in both the sacred and secular spheres. By 1600 this literature amounted to more than 60 titles. Its influence spread throughout Europe and provided the main themes of seventeenth-century academic art education which in turn shaped the perception and practice of art and art history into the present century.

Renaissance art theory is initially an Italian phenomenon. It begins in 1438 with Leon Battista Alberti's *Della Pittura* followed by Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Commentari* (c. 1447), Piero della Francesca's treatises on perspective (*De prospetiva pingendi*) and Leonardo's unfinished *Trattato della pittura* which only appeared posthumously in Paris in 1651. In the age of printing the genre of the art treatise emerged in the closing years of the 1540s. At the time, rumours of the imminent publication of Giorgio Vasari's *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti* prompted several writers to publish their views on art, mostly in Florence and Venice. These include Paolo Pino (*Dialogo di Pittura*, Venice, 1548), Anton Francesco Doni (*Disegno*, Venice, 1549), Michelangelo Biondo (*Della nobilissima Pittura*, Venice, 1549) and Benedetto Varchi (*Due Lezzioni*, Florence, 1549). From this period onwards every decade left a steady stream of art treatises mostly in Central and Northern Italy.

While Italian writers were publishing treatises in praise of the visual arts, Northern Reformers were advocating their removal from churches, initiating controversies which inspired iconoclastic waves from southern France to Scandinavia. In response, the Catholics re-emphasized the Church's doctrine on images in Latin works of theology as well as in vernacular art literature. By the late sixteenth century this situation produced an art theory that combined humanist views with Byzantine and medieval doctrines on images.

Thus the fabric of Renaissance art theories consists of ideas on the function and use of images geared towards the religious sphere intertwined with secular views on the definition, history and criticism of the visual arts.

Reformation and Counter-Reformation Art Theories

The basic doctrine of the Church on images provided the foundation of Renaissance art theories. Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604) stated its main points in his letter to bishop Serenus of Marseilles (xi, 105). These ideas, which were further developed during the Byzantine controversies on images of the seventh and eighth centuries, prevailed until modern times with remarkably little change. The Church stated that images are the books of the illiterate and must teach, impress the memory and inspire piety. Images, in other words, must be didactic, mnemonic and inspirational.

The religious doctrine of images did not change, but the emphasis of late medieval piety on the humanity and suffering of Christ meant that images served increasingly as meditational aids of an intensively empathic and imaginative form of devotion. Furthermore, despite the insistence of Catholic theologians that images should be worshipped for what they represent rather than in themselves, in practice, late medieval religion increasingly blurred the line between appropriate worship and idolatry. Images were honoured with crowns of flowers and revered with genuflection and kisses; many were believed to perform miracles and sometimes became the focus of pilgrimages.

In the North, the Reformers endeavoured to rid Christianity of these practices which they perceived as idolatrous. Martin Luther (1483–1546), who initiated the movement in Wittenberg in 1517, condemned idolatry as much as iconoclasm. He considered images neither good nor bad in themselves but observed that their use generated two problems: excessive expenditure for church decoration, and improper worship. He believed that no merit could be earned by worshipping and praying to images nor by destroying them; he also condemned iconoclasm as a dangerous catalyst of public disorder. Nevertheless he tolerated the presence of didactic images in churches for the sake of the weak.

Unlike Luther, the other Reformers considered the eradication of images essential to the Reformation of Christianity. Andreas Karlstatd's treatise on the removal of images (*Von Abtuhung der Bylder*, Wittenberg, 1521) initiated the first iconoclastic episode of the Reformation in Wittenberg. While Luther halted Karlstatd's revolution, the iconoclastic theology of Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), Heinrich Bullinger (1504–75) and above all Jean Calvin (1509–64) prompted the removal and destruction of images throughout Switzerland, Germany, France, the Netherlands, England and Scandinavia.

The Reformers fought images on textual grounds. They emphasized the Biblical interdict (*Exodus* 20: 4–5) and stated that Saint Paul as well as the Early Church Fathers disapproved of their use in worship. They considered images a later introduction implemented by the Church in breach of the biblical interdict, of patristic disapproval and of early Christian practices.

In images themselves they condemned the increasing presence of classical models in the depiction of sacred figures. In the lack of clarity and decency which

they discerned in pictures they feared further potential for generating false beliefs and thoughts. Above all they considered the visual arts an inadequate means of translating and broadcasting a religion initially revealed by the word of God rather than by images. Consequently they advocated the peaceful and orderly removal of images that they insistently described as inanimate objects stealing an honour due to God alone. Their writings and preaching nevertheless inspired brutal assaults, which treated images as animate beings and submitted them to rituals of public humiliation and torture. Iconoclasts gouged out the eyes of sculptures and broke their hands. They sometimes re-enacted the Passion on effigies of Christ, desecrated statues of the Virgin and the saints, carried them in mock processions, and challenged them to perform miracles before quartering them like the bodies of criminals.

To counteract Reformist criticism, the Council of Trent (1564) – which marks the beginning of the Counter-Reformation – insisted that images are didactic, mnemonic and inspirational and should not be adored in themselves, thus merely repeating the traditional view. The Council also called for the suppression of all abuses and superstitious practices and entrusted the control of Church decoration to local bishops. These decrees seem to have exercised far less influence in Italy than in Spain where religious authorities kept a tighter control on images. In Seville, for instance, at the time one of the largest European metropolises, the Inquisition ensured that an inspector regularly visited the Churches and advised on images.

While no such scheme existed in Counter-Reformation Italy, religious ideas consistently appear in the vernacular art literature of the last third of the sixteenth century, as confirmed by texts such as those of Giovan Andrea Gilio (1564), Gabriele Paleotti (*Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane*, Bologna, 1582), Romano Alberti (*Della nobiltà della pittura*, Rome, 1585) or Gregorio Comanini (*Il Figino overo del fine della pittura*, Mantua, 1591).

Catholic writers argued that it was the irresponsibility of artists, rather than the shortcomings of the doctrine of the Church, which prompted Northern criticism. To eradicate abuses they provided detailed prescriptions for the correct depiction of religious subjects. Iconographic advice occupies a fair part of Johannes Van der Meulen's (known as Molanus) *De Picturis et imaginibus sacris* (Louvain, 1570), and features prominently in the treatises of Gilio, Paleotti and Comanini as well as in more secular writings such as those of the painters Gian Paolo Lomazzo (*Trattato dell'Arte de la Pittura*, Milan, 1585) and Giovan Battista Armenini (*De' veri Precetti della Pittura*, Ravenna, 1586). In Spain, the *Arte de la Pintura* (Seville, 1649), a compendium of secular and religious ideas on art, begun by the painter Francesco Pacheco since the late sixteenth century, imposed itself as an iconographic manual followed by Spanish artists.

Giovan Andrea Gilio's *Dialogo degli Errori e degli Abusi de' Pittori* (Camerino, 1564) provides a typical sample of this literature. Like most Catholic polemicists Gilio is primarily concerned with the clarity of pictures rather than their style. He thus notes that painters make mistakes likely to breed erroneous ideas. They

represent for instance ascetic saints like plump monks with pink cheeks, Saint Sebastian martyred with hardly any arrows or Saint Laurence grilling with no sign of burns. On a more pedantic note Gilio notices that John the Evangelist appears at the foot of the cross as a teenager while he was at least 30 at the time of the Crucifixion and that the Magdalene is depicted as a prostitute although she had already abandoned her profession.

Gilio does not oppose artistic licence as long as it respects the decorum of the story represented. In this respect he objects to works like Sebastiano del Piombo's *Flagellation* (1521–4, Rome, San Pietro in Montorio) in which 'the blows seem administered with a cotton whip, as a joke, rather than inflicted with thick cables full of knots and worse things. And with such demonstrations no one will learn to understand the bitterness of [Christ's] pain . . . and the other great miseries'. Instead Gilio wants to see 'Christ afflicted, bleeding, covered with spits, flayed and deformed' (1960, p. 40).

Spanish art, especially polychrome sculpture, abounds with such imagery, so typical of medieval and Renaissance devotional literature, but it does not correspond to any mainstream Italian representation of the Passion. Gilio was aware of this and even spoke to painters: 'Many times I have discussed this matter with painters. They all have replied to me, with the same voice, that this would be against the decorum of their art' (1960, p. 41).

Thus, by 1564, Italian artists were following conventions that did not always fulfil the didactic requirements of religious art. Part of this phenomenon can be explained by the influence of secular ideas on art which began developing in the fifteenth century and started appearing in print from the 1540s onwards. Nevertheless, while the growth of humanistic art theory bred potential incompatibilities between secular and religious criteria, it also served in many ways the purpose of sacred images. In fact Leon Battista Alberti, the founder of humanistic art theory, was himself a cleric.

The Humanistic Theory of Art

Secular Renaissance art theories sprang from enthusiasm for art rather than interest and concern in its function. They revised the position of the visual arts in the hierarchy of arts and sciences, provided detailed accounts of artistic creation, defined painting in terms borrowed from rhetoric and poetics and expressed spectatorship in a language imbued with Neoplatonism.

Painting and the liberal arts

The typical Renaissance claim that painting and sculpture are liberal arts departs from the medieval tradition which considered them mechanical arts, that is, salaried manual activities practised by men of modest social status. The liberal arts constituted the foundation of medieval and Renaissance higher education.

They included two branches: the trivium – consisting of grammar, rhetoric and dialectic – and the quadrivium, namely geometry, arithmetic, music and astronomy. Artistic claims to liberal status probably took shape in the ambience of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian courts. There, artists such as Leonardo, Filarete or Mantegna enjoyed salaried conditions and privileges identical to those of court poets, mathematicians and astronomers and consequently expected their profession to benefit from a similar recognition. Furthermore, from the fifteenth century onwards, the public monuments created by artists such as Masaccio, Donatello, Ghiberti, Brunelleschi and Michelangelo raised their prestige to that of civic heroes, on a par with writers, philosophers and statesmen. Nevertheless, in the Renaissance context, the conception of painting as an intellectual pursuit suitable for men of noble birth remained more an aspiration than a reality. Even if painting was deemed a suitable subject of gentlemanly conversation and drawing was considered an appropriate gentlemanly skill, it remains a fact that not a single Renaissance artist came from an aristocratic family.

Artistic creation

These intellectual aspirations led art theorists to emphasize the conceptual side of painting and ignore its technical aspects. In his *Della Pittura* of 1438 Leon Battista Alberti defined painting as a cross-section of the visual pyramid – in other words as a slice of the imaginary field between the eye and the object it perceives. Later definitions of painting focused on the mind rather than the eye as confirmed by the sixteenth-century commonplace that a painting is primarily a mental image conceived in the imagination of the artist before its transcription on the canvas or the panel.

Renaissance sources describe this process through the Aristotelian doctrine of the soul adopted in Europe from the Middle Ages well into the seventeenth century. It states that there is no possible knowledge without sensation. Four faculties bridge the gap between the external and internal worlds: common sense, fantasy, imagination and memory. To perceive is to receive sensory impressions through the common sense, hold them in the fantasy, process them into intelligible mental images by means of the imagination and the rational mind, and store them in the memory for future retrieval. This account of perception and cognition is also the method by which a painter would naturally compose a picture before reproducing it by technical means. A passage from a treatise by the painter Romano Alberti, *Della nobiltà della Pittura* (1585), describes this process in the following terms:

> . . . the painter cannot produce any form or figure . . . if first this form or figure is not imagined and reduced into a mental image (*idea*) by the inward wits. And to paint, one needs acute senses and a good imagination with which one can get to know the things one sees in such a way that, once these things are not present anymore and transformed into mental images (*fantasmi*), they can be presented to

> the intellect. In the second stage, the intellect by means of its judgement puts these things together and, finally, in the third stage the intellect turns these mental images . . . into a finished composition which it afterwards represents in painting by means of its ability to cause movement in the body. (1960–2, p. 208)

Most Renaissance art treatises divided the passage from conceptualization to execution into three steps corresponding to the three first parts of classical rhetoric. Thus, while the manuals of Cicero and Quintilian organized the composition of a discourse into *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria* and *pronuntiatio*, Renaissance art treatises referred to painting in terms of invention, disposition and colour.

Since patrons, rather than painters, chose the subject, Renaissance art criticism focused on disposition as the part of painting in which the ingenuity of the artist could be best observed and assessed.

Disegno *and* idea

These views on artistic creation form the background of concepts such as *disegno* and *idea*. These refer to creation, composition and representation of mental images. In Italian *disegno* signifies both 'drawing' and 'project', a meaning already present in fifteenth-century sources. Many Renaissance artists were proficient in painting, sculpture and architecture and frequently provided drawings for the minor arts such as goldsmithery and tapestry. By the second half of the sixteenth century, *disegno* had become a theoretical principle unifying the practice of painting, sculpture and architecture, on the basis of which a group of Florentine artists founded in 1563 the *Accademia del Disegno*, the first official art academy. One of them, the painter and biographer Giorgio Vasari, provided the best-known definition of *disegno* in the introduction to the second augmented edition of his *Le Vite de' più eccellenti Pittori, Scultori e Architetti* (1568): '*Disegno* is an apparent expression and declaration of the concept (*concetto*) held in the mind and of that which, to say the same thing, has been imagined in the intellect and fabricated in the *idea*' (Vasari, 1976, I, p. 111).

Thus the practice of *disegno* involves two related mental abilities: visualization and deduction. Visualization involved first imagining a composition of figures and then reproducing it. In this respect the process is similar to meditational exercises by which devotional literature recommended to lay and monastic audiences that they imagine themselves present at scenes from the life of Christ. In the case of painting, however, the organization of such composition required the ability to deduce the correct shape and position of figures in terms of anatomy and proportion in order to draw them from imagination. In sixteenth-century art theory the invention of figures in various positions, devoid of narrative argument, almost became a discipline in itself acquired by copying ancient and modern works of art as well as by studying and mastering human anatomy. As Vasari writes:

> the best thing is to draw men and women from the nude and thus fix in the memory by constant exercise, the muscles of the torso, back, legs, arms and knees, and the bone underneath. Then one may be sure that through much study attitudes in any position can be drawn by help of the imagination without one's having the living forms in view. Again, having seen bodies dissected one knows how the bones lie, and the muscles and sinews, and all the order and conditions of anatomy, so that it is possible with greater security and more correctness to place the limbs and arrange the muscles of the body in the figures we draw. (1976, I, p. 115)

This emphasis on the figure so typical of Renaissance art and art theory eventually formed the foundation of the hierarchy of the genres which reached its full development in the seventeenth century. Still life, landscape and portrait, based on the direct copy of the model, were deemed inferior to sacred and profane history, which required the artist to work from imagination. While sixteenth-century writers were far from systematic we find the roots of this approach in Vicenzio Danti's *Trattato delle perfette proportioni* (1567). Danti, a pupil of Michelangelo, opposed two modes of depiction: *ritrarre*, to copy things as they appear, and *imitare,* to represent things as they should be. He contrasted these two methods in terms of the faculties of the soul which they involve. In *ritrarre* the artist copies mechanically what he perceives and employs only his lowest faculties. *Imitare*, on the contrary, to quote Danti, 'uses all the faculties (*potenze*) of the intellect and follows the most noble path of philosophy composed of speculations and considerations on the causes of things' (1960, p. 265).

Danti's most articulate follower, Federico Zuccaro, went as far as setting *disegno* as a central principle of pictorial thought and divided it in types corresponding to each faculty of the mind. Nevertheless, in spite of this pronounced tendency towards intellectualization, the late sixteenth century witnessed a resurgence of naturalism which manifested itself in the rise of scientific illustration, the emergence of still life and genre paintings as autonomous genres, as well as in the brief but powerful impact of Caravaggesque naturalism during the first decades of the seventeenth century.

Imitation

In order to draw and compose from imagination Renaissance artists studied live models and copied antique and modern works of art. Imitation is a synthetic process leading to the acquisition of style (*maniera*). The idea of selecting the best parts of several models to create a perfect whole is an ancient theme which circulated throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages. In the sixteenth century it reflects broad conceptions of style followed by artists, writers, orators, musicians, courtiers and even courtesans. In literature the topic prompted debates on whether to focus on one model or to imitate several.

Although sixteenth-century art theorists acknowledged the importance of understanding each model individually, they generally referred to imitation as the discerning synthesis of perfections scattered over the works of several

masters. The late-medieval *Libro dell'Arte* of Cennino Cennini (Florence, *c*.1390) provides a typical example when enjoining the apprentice '. . . to take pain and delight in always copying the best things that he can find by the hand of great masters'. Adopted by Alberti (III, 56, p. 96), this method features in virtually every Renaissance art treatise and is usually associated with the tale of the antique painter Zeuxis combining the best features of five maidens to depict Helen of Troy (Pliny, *Natural History*, XXXVI). Moreover, in the early 1540s the Venice-based writer Giulio Camillo del Minio pointed out that since works of painting surpass those of nature, painters should imitate art rather than Nature (*Della imitatione*, Venice, 1542). The Venetian painter Paolo Pino echoed a similar view when he wrote that the greatest painting in the world would combine Michelangelo's *disegno* and Titian's colour (Pino, 1960, p. 127). This approach promoted a form of painting that increasingly quoted previous masters, and sharpened a new awareness of the history of styles which eventually led to a classification of artists by schools. Such parameters already functioned in the late sixteenth century as confirmed by a sonnet attributed to the Bolognese circle of the Carracci. The sonnet praises the art of Niccolò dell'Abbate (c. 1509/12–71) as the discerning synthesis of good Roman draughtsmanship, Venetian shading and Lombard colour, Michelangelo's *terribilità* and Titian's naturalism, Corregio's style, pure and lofty, Raphael's symmetry, Pellegrino Tibaldi's decorum, Primaticcio's inventiveness and Parmigianino's grace.

The practice of combining various styles to acquire one's own pervades Renaissance artistic education and refers as much to a biological as to a cultural phenomenon: bees selectively collecting pollen to produce honey, a topos usually invoked as the natural model of synthetic imitation. Thus even if the Renaissance eclectic conception of imitation seems to promote Mannerism rather than naturalism, it was nevertheless perceived as the re-enactment of a natural phenomenon.

Art and nature

Imitation also refers to the structural similarities between artistic and natural creation. Successful imitation implies the presence of natural qualities in works of art. Two related families of concepts, those of *sprezzatura* and abundance (*copia*), illustrate this point. *Sprezzatura*, as defined by Baldassare Castiglione's Renaissance best-seller on court conduct, *Il Cortegiano* (Venice 1528, I, 26), is the ability to give the appearance of ease to what is difficult, the art of concealing art; its contrary is the forceful display of effort. *Sprezzatura*, or ease, applied to many aspects of social life as well as to disciplines such as dance, music and eloquence. Lodovico Dolce's *Dialogo della Pittura* (Venice, 1557) offers a typical application of the term to art criticism. The first part of this dialogue is a systematic comparison of the works of Michelangelo and Raphael which concludes with an ironic depreciation of the works of Michelangelo as the best example of the worst style – displaying the difficulty of art:

> And just as Michelangelo has always sought difficulty in all his works, so Raphael on the contrary always sought ease. It is an element hard to achieve . . . and he has laid hold of it in such a way that his works appeared to have been produced without thought, nor are they laboured or overdone, which is a mark of the highest perfection. (Dolce, 2000, p. 196)

According to Dolce, Michelangelo's works not only displayed, rather than concealed, difficulty, but they also lacked variety as they took the male nude as their exclusive subject.

The themes of variety and abundance are broad categories spilling across the gates of various disciplines. While the most important elaboration on these concepts comes from classical rhetoric, variety and abundance were first and foremost perceived as qualities intrinsic to nature rather than to culture. In painting, to quote Alberti's *Della Pittura*:

> That which first gives pleasure . . . comes from the copiousness and variety of things . . . the soul is delighted by all copiousness and variety. For this reason copiousness and variety please in painting. An *istoria* is most copious in which in their place are mixed old, young, maidens, women, youths, young boys, fowls, small dogs, birds, horses, sheep, buildings, landscape and all similar things. (Alberti, 1973, Bk. 2, para. 40, p. 68)

In other words variety and abundance in painting reflect the variety and abundance of nature itself in the artist's mind. Narrative painting confined the fertility of artistic imagination to the limits set by the subject, but ornamentation provided its broadest field of expansion. Furthermore, the late-fifteenth-century rediscovery of the Domus Aurea, the house of the Roman Emperor Nero, provided a repertoire of ornaments that, thanks to the prestige of its antiquity, was eagerly followed by Renaissance artists. These ornaments, called *grottesche* because they were initially found in grottoes, allowed for limitless combinations of mineral, vegetal and animal forms. In his *Idea* of 1607 Federico Zuccaro wrote in praise of ornamental art which he illustrated with examples taken from the works of Raphael, Giulio Romano, Perino del Vaga, Baldassare Peruzzi, Giovanni da Udine, Francesco Salviati and Michelangelo. The extraordinary inventiveness showed by these artists led Zuccaro to reiterate the commonplace that 'as nature is abundant and varied, in the same way the good painter must be varied and abundant, and attend to imitate the best' (1961, part 2, p. 19).

The topos of the universality of painting, which circulates in art literature from the fifteenth century, further emphasized these links between art and nature. Although Renaissance writers produced a theory centred on the human figure they praised painting's universality through a topical accumulation of natural phenomena evocative of landscape painting. According to Pino, painting can represent 'the sky with the sun, the moon and the stars, rain and snow and the clouds caused by winds, earth and water . . . variety of Spring, the charms of summer or . . . the cold and wet season of winter' (1960, p. 106).

Art and Neoplatonism

Renaissance ideas on beauty in art as well as in the real world display a strong influence of Neoplatonism, as broadcast by Marsilio Ficino's vernacular commentary on Plato's *Symposium* (*De Amore*, Florence, 1469). In the Neoplatonic universe the visual perception of the shadows of divine beauty sparks the first steps of the ascending of the soul towards God. While this doctrine had a negligible impact in the fields of theology and religion, the idea that sight perceives the spiritual emanations of a higher sphere enjoyed a considerable following in vernacular love literature and by extension in Renaissance aesthetics. It gave rise to the idea that sight can perceive incorporeal qualities inaccessible to the lowest senses of touch, taste and smell. By the middle of the sixteenth century these qualities were commonly used to describe works of art and given names such as *aria*, *maestà*, *venustà*, *vaghezza* and above all *grazia* (grace). Strictly speaking grace is not specific to visual perception, but was perceptible by sight. Although it could not be measured, it served, nevertheless, to assess and praise works of arts (as confirmed, for instance, by the 737 times Vasari uses the term, in his *Vite*). The discussion of grace in art becomes a commentary on the skill of the artist, a specific quality independent of the material support of the image, and sometimes from the subject of the image itself. This does not imply that paintings served as a visual ladder to God, but rather that Neoplatonic ideas eventually provided a convenient means of expressing artistic excellence.

The Renaissance conception of representation and spectatorship is thus an eclectic assemblage in which the contemporary awareness of the functioning of the mind, largely defined by Aristotelian psychology, serves to explain the creation of images often described and assessed in terms reminiscent of Neoplatonic aesthetics.

Secular art theories remained untouched by the spirit of controversy which animated the numerous literary debates of sixteenth-century Italy. The only notable exception is the *paragone*, a debate on the respective nobility of painting and sculpture. The debate benefited from the intervention of figures such as Leonardo, Vasari, Cellini and Galileo. On the whole the dispute opposes two professions, painting and sculpture, rather than two conceptions of art. The terms of the debate clearly imply that the nobility of each profession rests on its intellectual difficulty and its distance from manual work and thus testify to Renaissance prejudice against manual work and for artistic intellectual aspirations. Similarly the comparison between painting and poetry which runs as a commonplace throughout Renaissance art literature emphasized the affinity between painting and poetry as well as the intellectual status of painting.

This tendency towards intellectualization means that Renaissance art literature presents an account of artistic creation almost entirely devoid of technical considerations. With the exception of Vasari's introduction to *Le Vite de' più eccellenti Pittori*, *Scultori e Architetti*, which reviews the technical aspects of the

visual arts, the only extant Renaissance literature on technique (such as Cennini's technical treatises) remained unpublished until the nineteenth century.

Conclusions

Renaissance art literature and theories are perhaps better seen as expressive of artistic aspirations than of realities. In the concrete world these aspirations prompted the foundation of the first art academies, in Florence (1563), Bologna (c. 1580) and Rome (1593). These mark the first steps in the progressive passage from the workshop, based on the archaic system of apprenticeship, repetitive practice and oral transmission, to the academy, an institution independent of the guilds and associated with literary and philosophical pursuits. In this respect sixteenth-century Italy produced the seeds of academic art theories and teaching programmes which flourished from the seventeenth century onwards. While it would have been simply unthinkable to teach the visual arts in a Renaissance university, the presence of art departments in most twenty-first-century universities undoubtedly marks the fulfilment of Renaissance artistic ideas and aspirations.

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Chapter 5

Touch, Tactility, and the Reception of Sculpture in Early Modern Italy

Geraldine A. Johnson

In most historical and theoretical discussions about the reception of art, the general (though usually unstated) assumption is that one should be concerned with ocular scrutiny, with how contemporary viewers, including artists themselves, used their eyes as the primary means for apprehending works of art.[1] Although the visual reception of art is clearly extremely important, one should consider another possibility, namely, that in the case of sculpture in particular, models of reception should be developed that are not based on optical interpretations alone, but that instead consider the tactile reception of three-dimensional art objects as well. How such an alternative model might function can be demonstrated by considering the case of early modern Italy, a period in which contemporary texts, paintings, and sculptural projects confirm that many writers and artists believed that touch was indeed an important way for beholders to negotiate encounters with three-dimensional art objects. By exploring the tactile reception of sculpture by early modern beholders, one also can begin to ask more generally whether it is possible to write a history of art or, more precisely, a history of the senses used to apprehend art, that goes beyond the ocularcentric and instead considers other modes of experience and forms of attention, such as those made available by touch.[2]

In light of the importance early modern culture accorded to issues related to sculptural tactility, it is somewhat surprising that most historians of sculpture in this period have tended to overlook the question of touch in their studies.[3] Tactility as an abstract concept, however, has interested a number of influential art historians (Iversen, 1993, *passim*; Olin, 1992, pp. 132–7; Podro, 1982, *passim*; Wood, 1998). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for instance, Adolf von Hildebrand, Alois Riegl, and Heinrich Wölfflin investigated the tactile qualities of sculpture, although generally from a theoretical rather than from an historical point of view. In this same period, Bernard Berenson discussed the depiction of what he called "tactile values" in early modern Italian paintings, but he did not apply this concept to three-dimensional sculpture, a somewhat paradoxical approach that is also seen in more recent studies of the role played by

touch in painted works by artists such as Cézanne, Kandinsky, and the Surrealists (Berenson, 1897, pp. 33–4; Shiff, 1991; Olin, 1989; Powell, 1997).

Some philosophers and intellectual historians, including Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, and Martin Jay, have begun to critique the ocularcentric assumptions of Western culture, in the process occasionally considering touch in passing. The feminist scholar Irigaray, for instance, has proposed the sense of touch as a possible alternative to what she sees as the patriarchal implications of contemporary culture's ocularcentrism (Irigaray, 1985, *passim*). Some anthropologists, behavioral psychologists, and developmental biologists also have started to privilege senses other than vision in their studies and experiments (Howes, 1991; Montagu, 1971; Synnott, 1993). Nevertheless, it is striking that most historians of sculpture, including those working on the early modern period, have only rarely touched on the question of touch as a practical, material, and historical (as opposed to solely an abstract or theoretical) phenomenon.

Conceptions of Touch from Antiquity to the Early Modern Period

Early modern notions of touch grew out of a long and distinguished tradition. Beginning in ancient Greece, touch had been repeatedly contrasted with sight in discussions about the hierarchy of the senses (Hall, 1999, pp. 80–103; Jay, 1993, pp. 21–82; Summers, 1987, pp. 32ff; Synnott, 1993, pp. 128–55). Plato and Aristotle, for example, both ranked touch well below sight in terms of its relative dignity since the former was considered to be a less cerebral and more carnal sense than the latter, an attitude that persisted throughout the Middle Ages. In the early modern period, many writers continued to stress the primacy and dignity of vision, especially in relation to touch. The Neoplatonic philosopher Marsilio Ficino, for instance, equated touch with the baser, more carnal forms of love and contrasted it with the higher, spiritual love associated with vision (Mendelsohn, 1982, p. 61). Since antiquity, vision also often has been proposed as a model for how knowledge is gained and assimilated by the mind, as when Aristotle compared the process of memory to looking repeatedly at a painting or when St. Augustine used vision as a paradigm for spiritual and intellectual contemplation (Summers, 1987, pp. 39–41, 89, 116, 200). In the early modern period, the pictorial practice of perspective became a key model not only for vision, but for subjectivity itself, that is, for how one formulates a "point of view" about the world in which one lives, an issue discussed by Erwin Panofsky (1991, originally published 1927) and a number of more recent scholars.

Despite this pervasive and ongoing tradition, however, the primacy of sight in ancient, medieval, and early modern thought is, in fact, not absolute, nor uncontested. Classical mythology, for instance, is replete with tales centered on visual anxiety – Narcissus, Orpheus, and the Medusa come immediately to mind – while it is often touch, rather than vision, that is associated with positive, life-giving powers, as in the myths of Pygmalion and Prometheus. For Plato, it was

sight's dangerous powers of illusion that were most worrying, while St. Augustine warned of the dangers associated with ocular desire, a subject of continuing concern to medieval theologians and philosophers (Jay, 1993, pp. 13, 27). Vision also was not universally accepted as the only model for explaining how one gains knowledge about the world. In the case of Aristotle, while he clearly praised sight above touch in terms of its relative dignity, he nevertheless concluded that the sense of touch was the basis for knowledge obtained from all the senses, a notion reiterated by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century (Summers, 1987, p. 103). The ancient Stoics went as far as using touch as a metaphor for vision itself when they compared the way an object is apprehended by visual "rays" supposedly emanating from the eye to a person reaching out to touch something with a stick, a concept still current in the eighteenth century, as seen in an illustration in the 1724 edition of René Descartes's book on optics, *La Dioptrique* (Lindberg, 1976, pp. 3, 9–10; Crary, 1990, p. 61). Metaphors for a variety of mental processes and experiences also were not exclusively visual in the pre-modern era. For example, in direct contrast to Aristotle's claim that memory was like a painting that could be re-viewed in one's mind, the sixteenth-century humanist Giordano Bruno likened memory to a series of carved, tactile statues that could be mentally re-encountered (Hall, 1999, pp. 66–7).

Thus, conceptions about the sense of touch, especially in relation to vision, in ancient, medieval, and early modern thought were complex and variable. By and large, however, scholars have focused on the ocularcentric orientation of early modern culture in particular, especially as demonstrated by growing interest in the practice of linear perspective. Indeed, many scholars have assumed that the primacy of vision, which is such an important characteristic of modern culture, holds true for the early modern period as well. One of the few generally admitted exceptions to such ocularcentric assumptions is the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period during which the sense of touch became the focus of a wide-ranging philosophical debate known as Molyneux's problem (Degenaar, 1996; Morgan, 1977). William Molyneux, an Irish philosopher, formulated the issue in 1688, when he asked whether a man, who had been blind from birth and whose vision was suddenly restored, would be able to identify by sight objects he had previously encountered by touch alone. Philosophers such as John Locke, George Berkeley, Voltaire, Denis Diderot, and Etienne Bonnet de Condilliac pondered Molyneux's question, with some of these writers concluding that the sense of touch was in fact fundamental for gaining empirical knowledge about the world and that vision served only as a secondary means of confirming such cognitive knowledge (Jay, 1993, pp. 98ff; Olin, 1992, pp. 133ff; Summers, 1987, pp. 324ff).

Well before Molyneux, however, artists and writers concerned with the visual arts had already demonstrated great interest in the sense of touch. For instance, a number of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paintings depict active, tactile engagements with sculpture. A few of these images belong to painted series depicting the five senses, as in the case of Jusepe de Ribera's *The Sense of Touch*

(*c.*1611–16, The Norton Simon Foundation, Pasadena), which shows a blind man examining a sculpted bust with his hands while a painting lies neglected in the foreground (plate 5.1). Other works, however, including a second painting by Ribera that again depicts a sightless man touching a bust (1632, Prado Museum, Madrid) and a similar image by another seventeenth-century painter, Luca Giordano (*c.*1660, Stanley Moss Collection, Riverdale-on-Hudson), seem to be fully independent meditations on sculptural tactility. The specific theme of the blind beholder's encounter with sculpture also appeared in early modern writings. For instance, in his *Iconologia* of 1603, Cesare Ripa claimed that Michelangelo had had to rely on touch alone to judge the merits of antique and modern statues when his vision began to fail in his old age (Hall, 1999, p. 87), a probably apocryphal tale that nevertheless seems to foreshadow claims that Edgar Degas's increasing interest in sculptural modelling in the later nineteenth century was due to his own deteriorating eyesight. Although the role played by touch in the production and reception of modern art will not be considered in this chapter, it is worth keeping in mind that even in this presumably much more ocularcentric era, tactility could still play an important role (see Olin, 1989; Shiff, 1991; Powell, 1997).

Sculpture and Tactility in Early Modern Italian Culture

For the present discussion, it is the significance of touch in early modern Italy that is of particular concern, as demonstrated in statues and paintings that thematized tactility both implicitly and explicitly, as well as in texts written in this period on the production and reception of sculpture. The first Italian treatise to consider sculpture from a theoretical perspective was composed in the mid-fifteenth century by Lorenzo Ghiberti, a practicing sculptor with intellectual ambitions.[4] When speaking in the abstract about sculpture, Ghiberti stresses the importance of vision, optics, and lighting effects. Not surprisingly, however, when he discusses specific statues he has personally encountered and often literally touched, Ghiberti introduces tactility as a key element in the reception of sculpture. For example, when describing a recently rediscovered antique female statue, Ghiberti states that "neither the eyes [alone] nor strong or moderate light are enough to comprehend [this work]; only [by] the hand touching it" can its beauty be fully appreciated (Ghiberti, 1947, p. 55). Elsewhere, Ghiberti records his encounter with another classical statue:

> I have seen by diffused light . . . a statue of an Hermaphrodite . . . which had been made with admirable skill. . . . In this [statue] there was the greatest refinement, which the eye would not have discovered, had not the hand sought it out. (Ghiberti, 1947, pp. 54–5)

For Ghiberti, therefore, touch seems to be even more essential than light or vision for understanding how actual sculptures should be encountered and assessed.

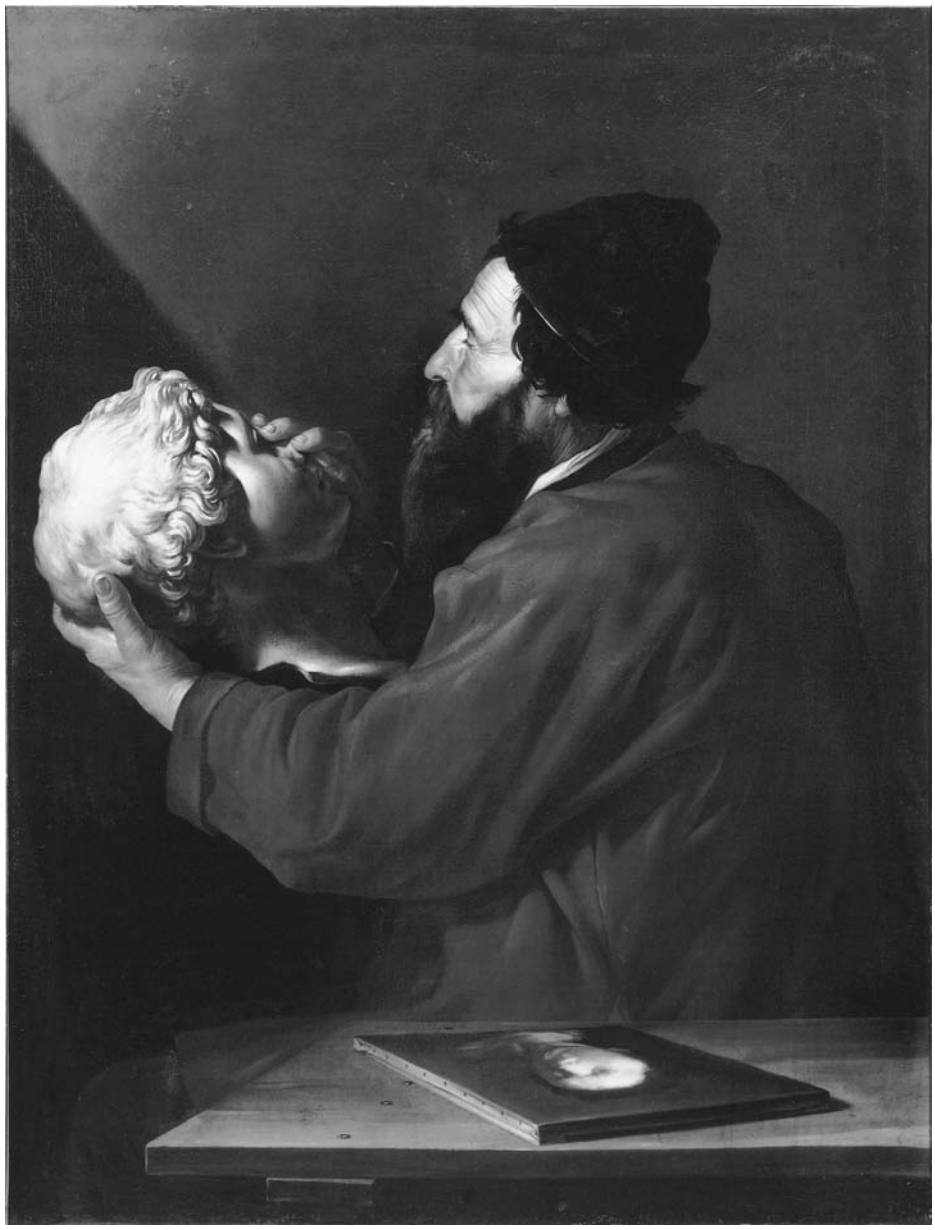


Plate 5.1 Giusepe de Ribera, *The Sense of Touch*, *c*.1611–16, oil on canvas. The Norton Simon Foundation, Pasadena, CA

Indeed, as Ghiberti seems to have understood, unlike a painting, a touchable sculpture often remains inaccessible to ocular scrutiny alone and may even require tactile exploration in order to be fully apprehended and appreciated, a fact that allows or even encourages beholders to interact with sculpted objects in

ways that are unimaginable for two-dimensional works of art. Ghiberti's manual encounters with female and bi-gendered statues in particular also suggest that sculpture's tactile accessibility at times can be profoundly intertwined with questions of sexual desire and differentiation.

There were, of course, many different types of touch associated with sculpture in the early modern period. Sculptural tactility could be linked to concerns about cognition (philosophical as well as physiological), to the social and sexual structures of desire, and to the power of magic and illusion. But it may be most useful to consider how such rubrics intersected with the various types of beholders who would have actually touched or tried to touch sculpted objects produced in the early modern period. For instance, for religious devotees, touch could have a talismanic or devotional quality, as when pilgrims strained to touch carved reliquaries and saints' tombs, or when wooden statues of Christ were removed from supporting Crucifixes for processions and ceremonies associated with Holy Week. Documents also describe nuns ritually handling life-size statues of the Christ Child, with these objects occasionally giving the illusion of magically coming to life in the women's arms (Klapisch-Zuber, 1985). Of course, it was precisely the possibility of physically engaging religious sculpture through the sense of touch that led some Italian Church reformers to publish polemical tracts denouncing practices such as kneeling before, kissing, and otherwise physically adoring and, in some senses, desiring sacred sculpture (Barocchi, 1978–9, vol. V, p. 1202).

Early modern collectors and connoisseurs, with their inquisitive, admiring, and proprietary hands, had somewhat different concerns in their tactile encounters with sculpture, even though certain aspects of these engagements echo the desires and religio-magical associations of the talismanic or devotional touch. Not surprisingly, early modern collectors often describe and depict themselves touching three-dimensional art objects. For example, in Titian's *Portrait of Jacopo Strada* (1567–8, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), the sitter is shown using both hands to hold a nude female statuette (plate 5.2). How such encounters are characterized, however, depends very much on the writer's or artist's point of view. Indeed, writers intent on promoting painting at the expense of sculpture often characterize the physical encounter with three-dimensional art objects in very negative terms. For instance, Vincenzio Borghini stresses how vulgar it is to judge a sculpture by touching it, as well as derides women who are obsessively drawn to touching and kissing statues (Barocchi, 1978–9, vol. III, pp. 615, 639). Another sixteenth-century art theorist, Paolo Pino, also ridicules the tactile allure of sculpture by citing the story of an ancient Athenian youth who was driven wild with desire by a statue of Venus (Barocchi, 1978–9, vol. III, p. 550). Such responses to the tempting tactility of sculpture suggest, to say the least, a certain level of anxiety about the dangers associated with handling sculpted objects inappropriately, especially by allowing them to become objects of sexual desire or by being taken in by the illusion of their lifelike three-dimensionality.



Plate 5.2 Titian, *Portrait of Jacopo Strada*, 1567–8, oil on canvas. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

The tactile reception of three-dimensional art objects was not always so explicit. Large-scale public or religious sculpture, for instance, was often literally out of hands' reach in this period. Nevertheless, it is likely that early modern beholders would have been able to imagine the implicit tactility of such works. As discussed above, most contemporary beholders would have witnessed the

regular ritual handling of movable religious sculpture. Many elite patrons also would have been familiar with small-scale bronze statuettes, a new sculptural genre that comprised works specifically designed to be held, turned, and otherwise manipulated by a beholder. A representative example of this type of object is Giambologna's *Venus Urania* (*c*.1573, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), one of his many gilded bronze female statuettes with smoothly polished surfaces and elegantly serpentine designs that almost seem to demand concentrated touching and handling. Thanks to the increasing availability of such statuettes, as well as long-standing religious practices that involved manually engaging sculpture, an early modern beholder's mimetic impulse to touch and his or her awareness of the implied tactility of large-scale works would have been encouraged and reinforced.[5]

In addition to the devotee's adoring hand and the elite collector's caress, there was also the sculptor's own touch, the hand of the maker, which again incorporated elements of the cognition, desire, and magic associated with other types of early modern encounters with sculpture. The importance accorded to the artist's active, manual engagement with sculpture is well illustrated by the fact that Ghiberti repeatedly refers in his writings to sculpture being made by the "hand" of a particular artist, while applying this term much more rarely to works produced in two-dimensional media. Of course, the idea of the "painter's hand" was important in early modern artistic culture as well (Barolsky, 1995), but the emphasis on the hand's physical engagement with the medium is particularly striking in discussions about sculpture. The significance of the sculptor's touch is attested to not only by early modern texts, however, but also by material evidence. Michelangelo, for instance, became famous (or rather, infamous) for leaving many of his statues and reliefs unfinished. One explanation for this phenomenon may be that Michelangelo wanted to preserve the material traces of his own potent and almost magically generative touch, thereby allowing his role as creator to be permanently commemorated by the sculpted surface itself, an attitude that once again links sculptural tactility to notions of illusion, possession, and desire.[6]

Sculpture, Painting, and the *Paragone* Debate

The three types of sculptural tactility associated here with different categories of early modern beholders – the devotional or talismanic touch of the religious devotee, the collector's possessive grasp, and the artist's generative handling – also are discussed in early modern writings devoted to the so-called *paragone* debate, the theoretical discussion concerned with comparing and contrasting sculpture and painting in order to establish which art was more noble (Hecht, 1984; Mendelsohn, 1982; Farago, 1992). One of the key issues raised by this debate revolved around the status of touch and its relation to notions of truthfulness (or the illusion of truthfulness) in art. For instance, in his response to a

mid-sixteenth-century questionnaire on the *paragone* devised by the humanist Benedetto Varchi, the sculptor Niccolò Tribolo stated that:

> [S]culpture is . . . [the art] of using one's hands to show what is true. . . . [I]f a blind man . . . happened to come upon a marble or wood or clay figure, he would claim that it was the figure of a [living person, but] . . . had it been a painting, he would have encountered nothing at all . . . [because] sculpture is the real thing, and painting is a lie. (Barocchi, 1978–9, vol. III, p. 518)

As mentioned above, the theme of the blind man's encounter with paintings versus sculpted objects can be found in a number of early modern texts and images (see Plate 5.1). However, in Tribolo's passage, this theme is now explicitly linked to the notion of the relative truthfulness of the various arts, a key issue in light of the value early modern culture placed on art's ability to imitate nature truthfully. In fact, Varchi himself explicitly stated that one "knows that by touching a statue one can confirm everything that the eye sees . . . which is why sculptors say their art is truthful and painting is [not]" (Barocchi, 1978–9, vol. III, p. 534).

Tactility was also an important issue in discussions on the social status of painters versus sculptors. In Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1528), for instance, a debate on the *paragone* takes place, with painting emerging as the proper art of the elite gentleman-courtier (Barocchi, 1978–9, vol. III, pp. 489–92; Hall, 1999, p. 17). Interestingly enough, the sculptor Baccio Bandinelli seems to have strived to embody Castiglione's ideal of the gentleman-artist in both his life and his sculptural practices in order to avoid being perceived as merely a working-class artisan engaged in a trade involving manual labor and little or no intellectual ability. Indeed, soon after Castiglione's book appeared, Agostino Veneziano produced an engraving of Bandinelli's studio based on a drawing by the sculptor himself in which the latter seems to have succeeded in banishing the sweat and dust of the working-class artisan's shop from his sculpture academy (1531, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; see Klein and Zerner, 1966, frontispiece). Instead, the well-dressed apprentices that surround the elegantly attired master are shown serenely sketching classicizing statuettes.

However, in an unintentionally telling detail that suggests that one should attend carefully to the gender- and class-based power relations implicit in such manual encounters with sculpture, Bandinelli seems unable to keep his hands off sculpture despite his social and academic pretensions: the inevitable tactile allure of the art he practices is inadvertently demonstrated here by the fact that his hands are shown firmly gripping a nude female statuette. A number of sixteenth-century paintings also depict male artists or collectors literally man-handling nude female sculptures. In the case of Titian's *Portrait of Jacopo Strada* discussed above, the female statuette held by the sitter is painted in the flesh tones of a living woman, rather than in the colors of white marble, plaster, clay, or polished bronze (see Plate 5.2). In other words, Titian's chromatic palette serves to equate visually the sculpted female body with the body of a living woman, thereby

reinforcing the intimations of desire and the illusion of sexual possession seen in many other types of early modern encounters with sculpture.

In this portrait and the print of Bandinelli's academy, the relationship between the toucher and the touched seems to remain essentially hierarchical, socially and sexually, with the elite male artist or beholder firmly in control of an apparently powerless sculpted female body. However, in comparison to an act of ocular scrutiny, this type of tactile relationship is comparatively reciprocal and thus retains the potential to subvert hierarchical relationships between men and women, between elite and disempowered subjects, and even between objects and their beholders. Indeed, as the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty asserts, the process of touching in general can be "an ambiguous set-up in which both [participants] . . . can alternate the rôles of 'touching' and being 'touched'" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 93). Thus, unlike most other theoretical models of sexual or social domination, in which visual or textual structures are in some sense metaphors for implicit underlying power structures, physical engagements with sculpted objects can explicitly demonstrate the hierarchical nature of such relationships while at the same time signalling how these hierarchies can be subverted and perhaps even reversed by the reciprocal nature of tactility itself.

Interestingly enough, one sixteenth-century artist in particular produced a series of paintings in which sitters resolutely avoid manual contact of any kind with sculpted objects. Instead, portraits by the painter Agnolo Bronzino often depict sitters who maintain an intellectual, emotional, and physical distance from three-dimensional art objects (Currie, 1997). Significantly, the haughty sitters in Bronzino's portraits, such as his *Young Man with a Lute and an Inkwell-Statuette of Susanna* (*c*.1534, Uffizi Gallery, Florence) or his *Gentleman with a Statuette of Venus* (*c*.1550–5, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa), do not even deign to look at, let alone touch, the sculpted figures displayed beside them. This determined antitactility vis-à-vis sculpture is readily explicable, however, if one realizes that Bronzino was one of the strongest advocates of painting in the on-going *paragone* debate. According to Bronzino, sculpture's three-dimensional tactility actually excluded the medium by definition from the realm of art altogether since "all that pertains to art are the [surface contour] lines that circumscribe a body . . . [and] therefore, the three-dimensional does not appertain to art but to nature" (Jacobs, 1988, p. 148n. 2). Thus, it is not surprising that Bronzino's painted depictions of sculpted objects de-emphasize the tactile allure of sculpture and instead highlight painting's ability to imitate coolly and dispassionately the natural and artificial world in full color.

Michelangelo's Verbal and Visual Tactility

Writers who favored sculpture and sculptors themselves refused to accept such negative assessments of sculptural tactility. In Michelangelo's writings, for example, it is clear that he ranked sculpture well above two-dimensional art

forms. Indeed, he even went as far as claiming that painting was best the more it resembled sculptural relief, while sculpture was worse the more it resembled painting (Klein and Zerner, 1966, pp. 13–14). Michelangelo also thematized the hand itself in many of his statues, for example in the auto-erotic, probing hand of the so-called *Dying Slave* (begun *c*.1513, Louvre Museum, Paris) or in the dramatically oversized hands of his marble *David* (1501–4, Accademia Gallery, Florence). Likewise, Michelangelo's *Moses* (*c*.1506–16, San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome), who insistently fingers his flowing beard, alludes visually to the important role played by touch in the enjoyment and evaluation of sculpted forms. The prominence of hands in many of Michelangelo's works suggests that, at some level, this member may have even functioned for the sculptor as a visual synecdoche, that is, as a part symbolically representing the sculptor – or perhaps the tactile art of sculpture – as a whole.

That Michelangelo was concerned or, one could even say, obsessed with sculpture's tactile allure and, as previously discussed, with the generative power of the sculptor's touch is confirmed by his poetry. For instance, in a number of poems, he uses the physical labor involved in carving a marble block by hand as a metaphor for the lover's desire to uncover the beloved's inner emotions. In other sonnets, Michelangelo sees the sculptor's "hand that obeys the intellect" as a powerful, life-giving force capable of magically animating carved figures almost like an early modern incarnation of Pygmalion or Prometheus (Mendelsohn, 1982, p. 103). In such texts, as well as in a number of his sculpted works, Michelangelo thus confirms the importance for him and for many of his contemporaries of tactility in all its cognitive, sociosexual, and magical-illusionistic variations. Indeed, the case of early modern Italy in general suggests that art history's prevailing ocularcentric assumptions need to be examined much more critically and that the reception of art, especially sculpture, should by no means be restricted to optical experiences alone.

Notes

1 Since the early 1980s, art historians such as Hans Belting (*Das Bild und sein Publikum im Mittelalter: Form und Funktion früher Bildtafeln der Passion*, Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1981), Michael Fried (*Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, University of Chicago Press, 1980), and Wolfgang Kemp (*Der Anteil des Betrachters: Rezeptionsästhetische Studien zur Malerei des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Munich: Mäander Verlag, 1983), have used reception theory (also known as reader-response criticism) in their studies, an approach first formulated in theoretical terms by literary historians such as Wolfgang Iser (*The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), and Hans Robert Jauss (*Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. by T. Bahti, University of Minnesota Press, 1982). On artists, especially painters, as the initial beholders of their own works and the implications this has for the production of art, see Richard Wollheim (*Painting as an Art*, Princeton University Press, 1987, *passim*).

2 The term "ocularcentric" refers to theoretical or historical approaches to art objects that privilege the visual. See Farago, p. 5, and especially Jay, p. 3 and *passim*. In this chapter, "early modern" (a phrase often used interchangeably with "Renaissance and Baroque") refers to a period stretching from the early fifteenth century through the seventeenth century. Also note that the term "beholder" (with its emphasis on "hold") is used throughout this chapter instead of "viewer" when discussing the reception of sculpture.

3 Two important exceptions are Michael Baxandall (*The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, Yale University Press, 1980) and Suzanne B. Butters (*The Triumph of Vulcan: Sculptors' Tools, Porphyry, and the Prince in Ducal Florence*, I–II, Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1996), scholars who have considered the material reality of early modern sculpture, if not explicitly its tactile reception. Nevertheless, only Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle (*Senses of Touch: Human Dignity and Deformity from Michelangelo to Calvin*, Leiden: Brill, 1998) and, more briefly, David Summers (1987, *passim*) have explicitly explored the importance of the sense of touch itself in relation to the production and reception of art in this era.

4 Although the architect and art theorist Leon Battista Alberti also wrote a treatise on sculpture (*De statua*) in this period, this text belongs primarily to an on-going tradition of technical manuals intended mainly for workshop use, unlike his famous book *De pictura*, which treated painting as a project worthy of serious humanistic and scientific consideration. See Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin Texts of De Pictura and De Statua*, trans. by C. Grayson, Phaidon, 1972; original works written *c.*1430s–40s.

5 The power of such imagined or anticipated tactility was discussed in a letter (*c.*1950s) sent to the art historian Meyer Schapiro by the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber. Kroeber claimed that, because infants first learn about the world through touch, "what is seen and touched is always made part of ourselves more intensely and more meaningfully than what is only seen. . . . [A] picture we *only* see but cannot, in imagination, touch, does not carry the same attraction and concentration of interest as the one we can, imaginatively, handle and touch as well as see" (Montagu, 1971, pp. 236–7).

6 See Juergen Schulz (1975) "Michelangelo's Unfinished Works," *The Art Bulletin*, 57, 366–73. For a contrary view of Michelangelo's *non-finito*, see Michael Hirst (1996) "Michelangelo and his First Biographers," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 94, 63–84, who argues that the artist never consciously wanted to leave any sculptural surface unfinished.

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Chapter 6

The Spiritual Exercises of Leonardo da Vinci

Robert Williams

To Martin Kemp

Fragmentary as they are, Leonardo's notes on painting constitute one of the high points in the history of art theory. Many of his ideas are found in the writings of his immediate predecessors – in Alberti and even in Cennino Cennini – but he leaves none of them undeveloped; he interrogates their assumptions more deeply and traces their implications more exhaustively. Where earlier theorists had insisted in general terms upon the importance of studying nature, Leonardo undertakes a famously exacting, comprehensive, and sustained investigation of natural phenomena; where they had cautiously compared painting to poetry and philosophy, he expounds a bold and highly developed conception of painting as a "science," a systematically self-reflexive mode of engaging and knowing the world. Though the great treatise which he planned was never finished, his ideas circulated widely: later writers elaborated some of them still further, often introducing notions with which Leonardo himself would have had little sympathy, but taking care to preserve the ideal conception of art as an activity at once rigorous in method and all-inclusive in scope. For modern scholarship, Leonardo's scientific ideal of painting is a distinctly *modern* ideal: it instances the scientific habit of mind that motivates all his researches and that makes him one of the forerunners of the Enlightenment.[1]

Modern scholarship has given less attention to Leonardo's remarks about how the painter should organize his time, how he should think about money, how he should comport himself and deal with his colleagues – about painting as a vocation and form of labor. Yet these remarks also develop the ideas of Cennino and Alberti; they too look forward to more explicit treatment in the work of later theorists. For all their obsessive quality – which we instinctively tend to refer to Leonardo's personal idiosyncrasies – they demand to be seen in relation to a larger historical process. Considered together, moreover, they reflect back upon the most familiar aspects of his thought. When, in a well-known passage, Leonardo writes, "the painter's mind should be like a mirror which transforms itself into the color of the thing that it has as its object, and is filled with as many likenesses as there are things placed before it" (in McMahon, 1956, no. 71), he

is not only advocating a strict fidelity to optical truth and defiantly turning the tables on Plato's critique of mimesis in a manner sympathetic to modern scientific values, he is offering a vivid and poignant description of what it means to be an artist: the condition of perpetual, heightened receptivity to visual sensations, ecstatic on the one hand, also demands an endless susceptibility and inner volatility – a kind of selflessness – on the other. The two-sided quality of this formulation says a great deal about the *work* that the artist does, and the peculiar form of self-discipline that it requires.

The aim of this chapter is to show that Leonardo's remarks about the discipline of art are an important aspect of his thought and an important feature of its modernity, to suggest that his overall approach to art needs to be seen, not only in terms of an emerging scientific mentality, but also against a background of new economic and social pressures equally characteristic of the modern world. Issues like the efficient use of time, attitudes toward money, and the rationalization of training were of concern to all craftsmen; while the ways in which those concerns are expressed in art-theoretical texts like Leonardo's shed light on the pressures specific to the practice of the visual arts, they also document a widespread transformation in the life of labor. By the same token, Leonardo's concern with the artist's disposition toward the world and toward other people, with the cultivation and refinement of his mental habits – with the perfection of his existential poise – should be seen as participating in the development and consolidation of modern regimes of social discipline. Though Leonardo's response to these external forces is far from simple – though he takes care, for instance, to *distinguish* the labor of artists from other kinds of labor, the artist's intellectual discipline from discipline of a more common kind – it is nonetheless a product of those very forces. Although his theory denies the relation of art to labor on one level, it also establishes the deeper basis of that relation: it redefines art as work of a larger, deeper, more exalted kind.

One way in which painters may take advantage of time is by continuing their studies on holidays, when work done for money is forbidden. Leonardo condemns those "hypocrites" who criticize artists for making studies from nature on feastdays: the study of nature, he insists, is a pious act, "the way to understand the maker of so many wonderful things and the way to love so great an inventor" (Kemp, 1989, p. 195). Modern readers may want to dismiss this kind of reasoning as opportunistic, but Leonardo frequently makes use of religious language: for him, the painter's vocation is every bit as serious as a religious vocation. Nor is his attitude so unusual. Cennino had said that the painter should approach his work in a lofty spirit: "your life should always be arranged just as if you were studying theology or philosophy" (Cennini, 1960, p. 16). Employing imagery from rites of monastic initiation, he advises the young painter to "begin by decking yourself with this attire: Enthusiasm, Reverence, Obedience, and Constancy" (Cennini, 1960, p. 3). What both Cennino's and Leonardo's formu-

lations document is an increasing pressure to learn, and a need to formulate a comprehensive personal discipline in order to meet the challenge. Drawing after work and on holidays was something that the most ambitious artists always did, but by Leonardo's time it may have become a prerequisite for anyone wishing to distinguish himself. By the early sixteenth century, the pressure seems to have been greater still: Vasari emphasizes how many of the most successful artists of his generation worked overtime in their youth, sometimes in the face of serious obstacles. Making no use of religious language, he presents them as motivated by personal ambition.

The attitude of artists who are willing to study on holidays, Leonardo goes on to say in the same passage, cannot be understood by those whose only concern is financial reward; it demands a love of virtue for its own sake. This remark indicates that his real target is not religious people, but lazy painters who use religion to attack their more ambitious colleagues. Cennino had distinguished between those who are moved to take up painting by a "lofty spirit" and "natural enthusiasm," and those others who pursue it primarily "because of poverty and domestic need, for profit" (Cennini, 1960, pp. 2–3). Alberti, himself an aristocrat, part of whose motivation in writing had been to show that painting is a pastime worthy of aristocrats, complained of painters "in the first flower of learning" who "suddenly sink to money making," and urged his readers to remember that fame is better than riches (Alberti, 1966, pp. 67, 89).

Leonardo is much more forceful: "O painter! beware lest the lust of gain should supplant in you the dignity of art; for the acquisition of glory is a much greater thing than the glory of riches" (in Richter, 1970, no. 502). Indeed, poverty is preferable to wealth: the poor man has fewer distractions in his pursuit of virtue. This line of reasoning reaches back past Christian monasticism to ancient philosophy, but Leonardo also reveals an awareness of the mundane pressures that the craftsman faces, and the ways in which they interfere with the achievement of excellence:

> If you argue that in making corrections time is going to waste which, if directed towards another work, would greatly increase what you could earn, you should learn that money earned in excess of our daily requirements is not worth much. . . . If your excuse is that the struggle against poverty has left you no time to study and truly ennoble yourself, blame no one but yourself, because it is the study of virtue that is food for both body and soul. How many philosophers have there been who have been rich but who have given their fortune away so as not to be corrupted by it? If your excuse is that you have children to feed, a little will suffice to them: see to it that their sustenance is the virtues, which are the true riches, for they never leave us, departing only with life itself. If you say you wish first to accumulate some capital wealth as an endowment for your old age [I say] the pursuit of virtue will never let you down nor let you grow old and allow the haven of the virtues to be filled with dreams and vain hopes. (in Kemp, 1989, pp. 194–5)

Leonardo's concern for the painter's purity of motivation certainly owes something to Alberti's aristocratic disdain for moneymaking, but it is also very different – both more sensitive to the realities *and* more sternly uncompromising. It exposes the kind of psychological ruthlessness that the craftsman must possess in order to succeed.

For Leonardo, one of the distinguishing features of the serious artist is the willingness to spend time in learning and in doing his work with care. "Remember, learn diligence before speedy execution"; work slowly (in Kemp, 1989, pp. 197–8). "Truly, it is impatience, the mother of folly, who praises brevity" (in Kemp, 1981, p. 286). He ridicules artists who "are only bent on a plentiful output and for one *soldo* more a day would sooner sew shoes than paint" (in Kemp, 1989, p. 201), and has no patience for those who "with supreme conceit" say that "they will not give good work for miserable payment, and that they could do as well as any other if they were well paid" (in Richter, 1970, no. 501). Alberti had warned against hurrying, but had also urged the young painter to work expeditiously, and insisted that one of the ultimate rewards of diligent application in study was speed and facility of execution (Alberti, 1966, pp. 95–6, 99). Some sixteenth-century painters and writers advocated a rapid working method: Vasari, who prided himself on speed, could justify it as the more inspired approach – closer to the poet than to the manual craftsman – but he also gives clear indication of its practical advantages. One of the best things about the art of his own time, he says, is the increased efficiency of production: where fourteenth-century painters had needed six years to paint a single large picture, he and his contemporaries can paint six in one year (Vasari, 1979, p. 774). Interestingly, Leonardo is one of the artists whom Vasari criticizes for working too slowly (Vasari, 1979, pp. 784–6, 792).

Other sixteenth-century artists and theorists saw the new cult of speed simply as an excuse for cutting corners. G. B. Armenini, writing toward the end of the century, complained about the lack of finish that had become customary among his contemporaries. Like Leonardo, he has no patience for the usual excuses: "that one is not paid according to merit, that the rich no longer recognize good work, that true skill is valued only in the lowliest places, and that, as a result, such works are perfectly appropriate, and that it is permissible, given the times, to pass them off in this fashion, without any more care or superfluous investment of labor." Those who complain, who say that they will die of starvation if they take the time to produce quality work, are to be "lumped in with the hacks"; they would do better to take up shoemaking (in Williams, 1995, p. 525). Armenini despised Vasari and characterized him in vicious terms as someone concerned only with making money (Williams, 1995, p. 526), but even Vasari had misgivings about the very rapid working method of painters like Tintoretto and Schiavone (Vasari, 1979, pp. 1694–5, 1700–1).[2]

Another tendency of lazy painters, Leonardo says, is to try to make up for their deficiencies by using dazzling pigments like gold and azure (Kemp, 1989, p. 196). Alberti had gently discouraged the use of gold leaf by saying that "there

is more praise for the painter" who succeeds in imitating the effect of gold with other pigments (Alberti, 1966, p. 85). Armenini would complain in more explicit and much angrier terms about painters who rely on gold and other "tacky" devices, and who are encouraged to do so by ignorant and tasteless patrons (Williams, 1995, pp. 526–7).

All this suggests that Leonardo's remarks should be seen as documents of an emerging economic pattern. Both Vasari and Armenini testify that by the early sixteenth century the influx of young artists into Rome had begun to affect the working environment in the city. Armenini says that the abundance of cheap labor made it possible for established masters to hire young painters by the day and for very low wages – "as if they were abject peasants" (in Williams, 1995, p. 521) – while the intense competition discouraged artists from spending much time on any single work and led to the disastrous emphasis on rapid execution. Such observations compel us to look at the artistic developments of the early sixteenth century in a new way. When Vasari says of Raphael, for instance, that "he was never seen to go to Court without having with him, as he left his house, some fifty painters, all able and excellent, who kept him company in order to do him honour" (Vasari, 1979, p. 914), he is not only celebrating Raphael's personal charm and professional success, he is also witnessing a crisis in working-class life: the spectacle of unemployed persons, many from out of town, gathering every day in places where they might be likely to find work, was an increasingly common one in early sixteenth-century cities, and was recognized as a symptom of serious social and economic dislocation.[3] When Vasari describes the rationalized division of labor in Raphael's workshop or the way in which the master "kept designers all over Italy . . . and even in Greece . . . for ever searching out everything of the good that might help his art" (Vasari, 1979, p. 903), he is not only describing the ways of a great man, but also a process of protoindustrialization that was taking place simultaneously in many crafts and in many places all over Europe. Remarks like Armenini's can be related to a similarly widespread breakdown in the relation between masters and journeymen and the development of permanent stratifications within the crafts.[4]

The evidence of texts like Leonardo's, Vasari's, and Armenini's also compels us to reconsider the emergence of artistic academies.[5] Armenini says that the situation in Rome in the early years of the sixteenth century reflected a crisis in the apprenticeship system: it created severe hardship for young artists and had a devastating effect on their training, making it necessary for them to educate themselves by studying on their own. Although the circumstances in which the different academies were established vary, and their aims vary in emphasis as a result, their common features suggest that they were designed to meet the challenges of this situation. They provided the kind of supportive fellowship that helped to bolster professional identity and pride; they also fostered an alternative form of education, one that helped to release the student from intellectual dependence on a single master by encouraging the combination of different styles. Although artistic academies modeled themselves on literary academies,

though exclusivity and elitism were often essential to their *esprit de corps*, and though some soon became the all-too-willing instruments of absolutist ideology, they also – especially in the earliest phase of their development – had something in common with the new guilds and journeymen's associations, organizations with which less well-established craftsmen sought to circumvent the old guilds and protect themselves from increasingly exploitative treatment by their more powerful colleagues.

Usually seen as the inevitable expression of a new intellectual confidence and social ambition among artists, academies may thus have been more like a makeshift solution to a desperate situation. The evidence suggests that even as artists were developing the most exalted sense of their own worth, they were realizing that the line separating them from the most servile labor was getting thinner and thinner. The economic reality of their time was such that all the ambition in the world barely kept them one step ahead of reabsorption into a growing and ever-more-degraded proletariat. The proud and ruthless dedication to high standards that one finds in Leonardo's writings – which would condense into simple social snobbery in later academic theory – testifies to the indignation and anxiety created by these circumstances.

Leonardo advises painters to use their time as efficiently as possible. The working day must be structured in order to take best advantage of lighting conditions: "Pay attention in the street toward evening, when the weather is bad, to how much grace and sweetness can be seen in the faces of men and women." If one cannot arrange one's studio in such a way as to duplicate desired light effects, then "work on a painting towards evening when it is cloudy or misty and this will be the perfect atmosphere" (in Kemp, 1989, p. 215). One must also plan around the seasons: in summer, make many nude studies from life; winter evenings can then be used for going over these drawings and learning from them (Kemp, 1989, p. 199). Indeed, every waking moment can and should be turned to account:

> I myself have proved it to be of no little use when in bed in the dark to run the imagination over the surface delineations of forms previously studied, or other remarkable things encompassed within subtle speculation. This is really a most praiseworthy activity and one that is useful for fixing things in the memory. (Leonardo in Kemp, 1989, pp. 224–5)

Such remarks indicate an intensity of discipline for which the most relevant precedents are the regimes of monastic life and the spiritual exercises of popular devotional literature. They document the elevation of art into a full-time, all-absorbing intellectual activity – into a new, secular form of spiritual exercise – but they also show how coercive it thus became, insinuating itself into the very last recesses of consciousness.

Self-criticism is essential to the working process. Alberti had warned painters against becoming used to their own mistakes (Alberti, 1966, p. 93); for Leonardo,

the painter is in continual danger of being "deceived in his own work," and must practice a continual, uncompromising self-criticism:

> When the work stands equal to one's judgment of it, it is a bad sign for the judgment. When the work surpasses one's judgment that is worse, as it happens to someone who is astonished at having produced such good work, and when the judgment disdains the work this is a perfect sign. If someone with such an attitude is young, without doubt he will become an excellent painter, but will produce few works, although these will be of such quality that men will stop in admiration to contemplate their perfection. (Leonardo in Kemp, 1989, p. 197)

Other people must also be utilized. Alberti had suggested that painters listen to the advice of friends and to the viewing public (Alberti, 1966, pp. 97–8), but Leonardo is worried lest friends prove too kind, and encourages the painter to harness the darker side of human nature:

> There is nothing that deceives us more than our own judgment when used to give an opinion on our own works. It is sound in judging the work of our enemies but not that of our friends, for hate and love are two of the most powerfully motivating factors found among living things. Thus, O painter, be eager to hear no less willingly what your enemies say about your work than what your friends say. (Leonardo in Kemp, 1989, p. 196)

A logical consequence of this calculating manipulation is that the painter must be on guard against the false flattery of enemies who only wish him to continue in his mistakes (Kemp, 1989, p. 196). The need for such a complex self-protective strategy testifies to the competitiveness of the working environment.

Receptivity to criticism and the habit of self-criticism are linked to an equally relentless self-objectification in the process of painting. Alberti had recommended the use of a mirror to help the painter spot defects in his work (Alberti, 1966, p. 83); Leonardo emphasizes the way in which a mirror can make the picture seem to be the work of another artist: "I say that when you are painting you ought to have by you a flat mirror in which you should often look at your work. The work will appear to you in reverse and will seem to be by the hand of another master and thereby you will be a better judge of its faults" (in Kemp, 1989, p. 203). The process of self-objectification is also helped by getting up from one's work regularly: "It is also good to get up and take a little recreation elsewhere, because when you return to your work your judgment will have improved. If you stay doggedly at your work you will greatly deceive yourself" (in Kemp, 1989, p. 203).

Alberti had recognized the need for occasional breaks: if physical labor demands rest for the body, painting, as a form of intellectual labor, requires "recreation for the soul" (Alberti, 1966, pp. 96–7). Such remarks can be seen as a way of insisting upon the intellectual, as opposed to merely physical, nature of the work involved, but they also offer a strategy for coping with the fact that

painting has *already* become a highly intellectualized activity, and that the particular stresses of intellectual work also require self-protective measures.

For Leonardo, the painter must not work too hard in the studio because the production of pictures is really only a small part of his job: his real work is the observation of nature and the human life around him. These researches require the greatest alertness and presence of mind:

> Do not do as other painters who when tired of using their imagination, leave off their works and take exercise by going for a walk, and yet retain such weariness of mind that, let alone seeing or taking in various objects, very often on meeting friends or relatives and being greeted by them, far from seeing and hearing them, these people are no more recognized than if the painter had met with thin air. (Leonardo in Kemp, 1989, p. 202)

The artist needs recreation, but his recreation is now part of his work. He should always carry a notebook with him and learn to record what he sees in quick and accurate sketches; once he can do so easily, he must leave his notebook at home, setting himself the more difficult challenge of remembering what he has seen well enough that he can draw it later (Kemp, 1989, p. 199). He must be responsive to everything around him. Alberti had observed that "nature herself seems to delight in painting, for in the cut faces of marble she often paints centaurs and faces of bearded and curly headed kings" (Alberti, 1966, p. 67), but Leonardo encourages the painter to pause frequently and look at bits of old wall, at ashes, clouds and mud puddles, "in which, if you consider them well, you will find really marvelous ideas" (in McMahon, 1956, no. 76). Again, art inhabits and redeems every stray moment; it colonizes every least significant corner of the world; it demands a mental discipline so highly developed and self-possessed that it can nourish itself even on randomness.

In general, painters should be solitary. Cennino had advised students to go out drawing by themselves, or only "in such company as will be inclined to do as you do, and not apt to disturb you" (Cennini, 1960, p. 16). Leonardo develops the idea with characteristic emphasis:

> If you are alone you belong entirely to yourself. If you are with just one companion you belong only half to yourself and less so in proportion to the intrusiveness of his behavior. And the more of your companions there are, the more you will fall into the same trouble. If you should say "I will go my own way and draw apart – the better to be able to speculate upon the forms of natural objects," then I say this could be harmful to you because you will not be able to prevent yourself from often lending an ear to their idle chatter. And since you cannot serve two masters you will perform badly in the role of companion and there will be an even worse consequence for the speculative study of your art. And if you say I shall withdraw so far apart that their words will not reach me, and will cause me no disturbance, I for my part would say that you would be held to be mad. But consider: by doing it you would at least be alone. (Kemp, 1995, p. 205)

Again, Leonardo seems both more sensitive and more ruthless than earlier theorists. Though his wording sententiously invokes the spirit of ancient heroes like Scipio – who was "never less alone than when he was alone" – he also shows that he has gone to great lengths in order to try working with others. Despite his self-assurance, he feels his isolation very deeply.

In another passage, Leonardo *does* recommend drawing in company, but only as a way of channeling competitive energy in a productive fashion:

> To draw in company is much better than to do so on one's own for many reasons. The first is that you will be ashamed to be counted among draughtsmen if your work is inadequate, and this disgrace must motivate you to profitable study. Secondly, a healthy envy will stimulate you to become one of those who are more praised than yourself, for the praises of others will spur you on. Another reason is that you will learn something from the drawings of those who do better than you, and if you become better than them you will have the advantage of showing your disgust at their shortcomings and the praises of others will enhance your virtue. (Leonardo in Kemp, 1981, p. 205)

As in his remarks about criticism, Leonardo advocates a calculated *use* of other people; such dissimulated collegiality is only a more telling indication of isolation. Even the moments of leisure one may have occasion to enjoy with fellow students should be turned to profit: "When, O draughtsmen! you desire to find relaxation in games you should always practice such things as may be of use in your profession" (in Kemp, 1989, p. 208), he urges, then describes a game for improving one's ability to reckon the size of objects at a distance.

The complex combination of skills – and balance of deeper psychological forces – that painting requires is succinctly expressed in one passage, in which Leonardo returns again to his favorite metaphor: "The painter ought to keep his own company and reflect upon that which he sees. He should debate with himself and choose the most excellent parts of the kinds of things he sees. He should be like a mirror which is transformed into as many colors as are placed before it, and doing this, he will seem to be a second nature" (in Kemp, 1989, p. 202).

The painter must look at everything, he must absorb everything, but he must maintain a rigorous, self-conscious isolation. For all his selfless dedication to nature, he must practice a discipline that is profoundly unnatural. He must somehow succeed in being both as passive as a mirror *and* as productive as another nature. The desire to be *another* nature registers the pressures of protoindustrialization even as it masks them. Such a passage exposes the underside, as it were, of the scientific ideal of painting, the psychological work that artists must *also* do, and that they have continued to do, in one way or another, ever since. This other, less obvious work, on which the scientific ideal depends, has remained more essential to art than the specifically scientific elements of the ideal itself.

Leonardo's concern with self-objectification is carried to its most obsessive extreme in his accounts of the measures that a painter must employ in order to

avoid reproducing his own features in the figures he paints and repeating the same figure over and over again. Cennino had shown how the artist might make a cast of his own body – presumably as an aid in the naturalistic representation of anatomy (Cennini, 1960, p. 129) – and the misuse of such casts may have contributed to the "vice" that Leonardo seems to have seen everywhere around him:

> The painter should make his figure according to the rules for a body in nature, which is commonly known to be of correct proportions. Besides, he should have himself measured to see where his own person varies much or little from the aforesaid proportions. With this information, he must studiously oppose, in the figures which he makes, falling into the same shortcomings which are found in his person. Be advised that you must fight your utmost against this vice, since it is a failing that was born together with judgment, because the soul, mistress of the body, is that which makes your judgment, and she naturally delights in works similar to that which she created in composing her body. And from this it comes about that there does not exist a woman so ugly that she does not find a lover, unless she is a monster. So remember to understand the shortcomings that exist in your own body, and so be on your guard against them in the figures which you compose. (Leonardo in Pedretti, 1964, pp. 53–4)

In an essay on this passage and others like it, Martin Kemp showed how Leonardo adapted the Aristotelian conception of the soul as the formative principle of the body – that is, the force that actually shapes the body – in order to explain why all the products of an artist's soul will tend to resemble one another (Kemp, 1976). In the effort to represent the world truthfully, the painter must work against the very faculties that condition his perception of the world, he must work against himself at the very deepest level. Painting is fundamentally a work of self-criticism, of self-refinement, of self-purification; it demands an effort to transcend the contingent and idiosyncratic nature of individual identity, to achieve a higher, more perfect, more objective identity.

If Leonardo's concern with certain issues relates to economic pressures, then his interest in self-objectification and the perfection of mental habits should also be seen in a larger historical context, as an instance of that refinement in the techniques of social discipline – especially the personal internalization of coercive forces – characteristic of early modern culture. His attempt to define painting as a science, as a practice that is both self-reflexive and all-inclusive, as an activity that requires an ideal subjective disposition toward the world, is a significant moment in the articulation of the ideally autonomous subjectivity we recognize as modern; that *art* becomes the site for the theorization of such subjectivity is indicative of the role that art comes to play in modern culture. The work of the artist is *essentially* the reconstitution of subjectivity in ideal form.

We may speculate that this redefinition of art marks a moment of crisis in subjectivity, the moment at which a simpler, more instinctive kind of individu-

ality was felt to have become obsolete, inadequate to the challenges of modern life. Perhaps one of the most important things that Leonardo's writings have to tell us is that the Renaissance was not the great age of individualism, but rather the moment when individuality became insistently problematical and thus demanded definition in *ideal* terms – when it became essentially *theoretical*. We need not assume that everyone experienced this crisis, or felt its effects to the same degree; instinctive individuality has survived, of course, if only as an effect of capital. And though we may have come to feel that even ideal subjectivity is obsolete, that our individuality is only ever provisional, some modes of being *are* better than others, and we still expect art to give us some guidance in choosing among them. Indeed, Leonardo makes us realize how much work our own subjectivity involves. Perhaps our responsiveness to Renaissance art is really grounded in our sense that the craftsmen who produced it had begun to engage a task we still face.

If art is how we theorize ourselves, if the work that art does is fundamentally theoretical, then theory is a direct extension of that work and the means by which art realizes something fundamental to itself. There is no doubt that art became more theoretical in the Renaissance, that it became in some way *essentially* theoretical: just as in the case of subjectivity, perhaps this development too marks a crisis, and a characteristically modern one. Art changed shape as vast array of possibilities opened before it and, at the same time, it was pressured by new economic forces. Again, we need not assume that all artists were affected in exactly the same ways by this situation, equally conscious of it, or equally well-equipped to respond, but the rigor, intensity, and high ambition of Leonardo's writings – not without comparison in the work of other Renaissance theorists – testify to the urgency of the situation for those who were.

Notes

1 Major contemporary interpretations of Leonardo's art theory that emphasize its scientific elements include the essays by Gombrich, the various works of Kemp, and the book by Farago. For quotations from Leonardo's writings, I have preferred the translation by M. Kemp and M. Walker (1989), but since it is a selection I have had occasion to use the older translations by Richter (1970), McMahon (1956), and Pedretti (1964). In a few places I have modified these translations.

2 For the economic circumstances surrounding speedy execution in Venetian painting, see the articles by Nichols (1994 and 1996).

3 For example, a French chronicler, Etienne de Médicis (discussed in Heller, 1996, pp. 32–3), writing toward the middle of the century, describes a crowd of unemployed persons that assembled in the square of Le Puy, waiting to be hired for various menial jobs. His comments make clear that this crowd was composed both of poor immigrants from the surrounding countryside and indigent craftsmen from the town itself who had been forced by circumstances to abandon their trades. Most interestingly – in view of the development of artistic academies at about the same time – he

sarcastically refers to the group as a *collège*, "full of vain, if amusing, talk and story-telling," and mentions that they subsequently formed their own confraternity.

4 On this situation as it affects Europe in general, see Huppert, 1998, pp. 109–11. Studies devoted to France include Davis (1966 and 1975), Farr (1988), Heller (1996), and Truant (1994). On the "oligarchical transformation" of an Italian guild, see Poni (1989, esp. pp. 81–2); on the complexity of the circumstances in Italy generally, see the essays gathered by Guenzi, et al., 1998.

5 The best introduction to the early history of academies is still Pevsner's book (1940); Dempsey's article (1980) offers a comparative study of the conditions surrounding the formation of two important ones. An attempt to situate the emergence of academies in an economic-historical context – limited, however, by its formulaic Marxism – is the book by Rossi (1980). Since most of the scholarly attention has focused on Florence and Bologna, Rossi's essay (1984) on the Accademia di San Luca in Rome is especially interesting.

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Chapter 7

Academic Theory 1550–1800

Paul Duro

From the time of the first public academies of art in Italy in the middle of the sixteenth century, through to the foundation of the Royal Academy in London in the third quarter of the eighteenth, academic art practice was informed by an evolving set of theories that, taken together, may properly be said to constitute a "discourse" on art. But before we embark on our topic, an immediate difficulty presents itself. What do we mean by "academic," and what by "theory"? In the case of the first term, academic may conveniently be taken to mean "of the academy" (the term "academy" itself derives from the Greek word "akademeia," the school where Plato taught philosophy). However, this seemingly unproblematic definition contains a major difficulty. While much of the theory discussed in this chapter is academic in the sense that it emanated from within academies of art, much else considered "academic" was formulated by artists or critics who did not belong to an academy in the narrow sense of the term. So here I will define as "academic" those theories that contributed to a discourse within the academic environment, whether or not all the protagonists may be said to have enjoyed an institutional affiliation with this or that academy.

A similar problem revolves around the word "theory." All art is "theorized" to the extent that there can be no practice without the intervention of the intellect (Michelangelo was hardly alone in arguing that an artist works with the brain and not the hand). It would therefore be foolish to attempt to differentiate between artists whose work is distinguished by the application of theory, and those whose work is seemingly bereft of ideas. Rather by academic theory I mean those ideas, precepts, and beliefs that together may be said to make up a more or less coherent visual ideology emanating from, and contributing to, academic association. It was the emphasis given within the academies to this discourse that ultimately separates academic theory from other forms of thinking about art, not its status as "theory" *per se*.

These opening remarks reveal an emphasis I shall be at pains to maintain throughout my discussion. "Theory," as an entity that is treatable in isolation from the aims of painting, can nowhere be found. All theory within the acade-

mies was formulated with one end in mind – the elucidation of practice. From the first the academies realized that, in order to differentiate themselves from competing forms of artistic production on the one hand, and to establish a new platform for their own practice on the other, it was necessary to build on a firm theoretical foundation. It is this bifocal concern that allows us to think of academic theory as the elaboration of a discourse on art while recognizing that at no time was it divorced from the concerns of practice. With this aim in view, I shall now divide my discussion into three related areas: the rise of academic theory, history painting, and theoretical production.

The Rise of Academic Theory

The view that painting and sculpture were open to theoretical debate in a way similar to that traditionally enjoyed by other arts, especially poetry, was a powerful incentive for the creation of the first academies of art in the sixteenth century. The reasons for this shift in emphasis are many and varied. Certainly of great importance was the necessity to respond to new social formations, especially in the emergent nation states which required a correspondingly national, public, and elevated art to answer the aspirations of their royal patrons. Likewise, a shift in artmaking away from religious imagery toward classical themes promoted the need for greater literary skills as well as reducing artists's dependence on traditional forms of knowledge. Most important, however, was the belief among a growing number of artists that painting and sculpture had outgrown the medieval craft associations of the guilds and were ready to take their place alongside the liberal arts encompassed by the classical curriculum of the trivium and quadrivium. Toward the end of the sixteenth century ambitious artists, first in Italy, then France, and later throughout Europe and the Americas, broke away from this essentially medieval form of artistic production and, identifying themselves with the idea of an academy, promoted the intellectual and creative aspects of artmaking over the artisanal and routine practices of their craft-based cousins.

The first artists' academy (as opposed to the private gatherings of dilettanti, antiquarians, and amateurs sometimes referred to as academies), was established in 1563 in Florence by the artist and historiographer Giorgio Vasari (1511–74) under the patronage of Grand Duke Cosimo I de' Medici (1519–74) and with the aged Michelangelo (1475–1564) at its head. The new academy, the *Accademia del Disegno*, distinguished between Fine Art and craft, and opened its doors to ambitious artists who preferred to see themselves as the equal of the poets. The Accademia welcomed artists and amateurs whose idea of art depended on an understanding of "disegno," that is, of drawing in its broader meaning of design and intellectual understanding, while the material aspects of paint, marble, or clay were treated as incidental to the central issue of design when questions of art practice were discussed.

This emphasis was foundational to the academies' sense of self-worth. As Vasari puts it in the introduction to the second edition of the *Lives of the Artists*, published in 1568:

> Proceeding from the intellect [drawing] extracts from many things a universal judgment, like a form or idea of all the things in nature. . . . From this knowledge there proceeds a certain idea or judgment, which is formed in the mind. . . . It can therefore be concluded, that this drawing is simply a visible expression and manifestation of the idea which exists in our mind. (Blunt, 1989, p. 100)

While Vasari's language is somewhat abstract, his meaning is not. Henceforth art with a claim to importance would be learned, and the academies developed a curriculum in which the study of anatomy, perspective, ancient history, and mathematics (the study of which was deemed to be foundational to the understanding of the physical universe) promoted a conceptual and intellectual bias over the skills of the hand. Furthermore, in the *Accademia del Disegno*'s constitution – and again this was typical of later academies – space was made for the inclusion of nonpractitioners who ensured the centrality of theoretical discussion and a wide-ranging literary bias within the discourse on art.

This bias also articulated a fundamental shift in the status of the artist. Whereas previously artmaking had been essentially a question of routine, with the emphasis firmly on knowledge of materials and the trade aspects of the craft, the advent of academic association heralded a move toward theory – that is, toward examining the role and purpose of art within the larger arena of practice. In the fifteenth century Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) had argued that "practice must be founded on sound theory" (Blunt, 1989, p. 49) and following this reasoning academic artists and theorists from Federico Zuccaro (1543–1609) to Giovanni Pietro Bellori (1615–96) argued for the centrality of the *idea* (what Zuccaro calls "disegno interno"), and promoted the view that the idea in the artist's mind should take precedence over the direct imitation of nature (denigrated as a mere sense impression and therefore suspect from an intellectual point of view), and that the artist's task was therefore to borrow from nature only those elements that would enable him to realize his prior idea (Blunt, 1989, p. 141).

Significantly, academic theory early on placed its emphasis on a narrow, and somewhat counterintuitive, definition of what constituted pictorial representation. While both Zuccaro and Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo (1538–1600) defined art as the imitation of nature, by which they meant that art and nature were both controlled by the intellect (the first by the human mind and the latter by the mind of God), neither meant that the artist should copy what was present in reality, in all its particularities, idiosyncrasies, and imperfection. Rather by imitation they mean the imitation – in the sense of its realization in art – of the idea of perfected nature as it was present in the artist's mind (Blunt, 1989, p. 141).

Two practices of crucial importance to the subsequent development of academic theory in the seventeenth century (especially within the circles of the French *Académie de peinture et de sculpture*), flowed from this premise. First, what was in the artistic mind mattered, since ultimately it was the object of imitation (and this meant imitating only the elevated and worthy in nature and human action). Second, since it was unlikely that any mind would be adequately so furnished, then the imitation of the works of others, especially the uncontested excellence of antique art, would itself become a prerequisite for the making of anything that was noteworthy and new.

This shift from direct observation, with all its rational and scientific overtones, to the imitation of the idea, traces another shift in Mannerist and baroque art theory from its foundation in Renaissance humanism to a more spiritual and mystical formulation of art. The artist was no longer subservient to the rules of observation, but free to follow his inspiration. As Zuccaro argues in his *L'Idea de' Pittori, Scultori et Architetti* (1607), the mind of the artist:

> Must be not only clear but free, and his invention unfettered and not compelled to the mechanical slavery of such rules; for this noble profession demands judgment and skillful execution which are its rules and standards of working. (Blunt, 1989, p. 145)

However, this did not mean that the artist's invention was unfettered. In place of the external rules of science the artist must observe a new set of internal constraints such as design, grace, decorum, imitation, and invention. In other words, art was now theorized in terms of a self-regulating practice, and it followed that henceforth it should be judged by how well it corresponded to its own self-policing policies.

As mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, the academies needed art theory to buttress their claims to superiority over the guilds which they characterized as anti-intellectual, but it is perhaps more accurate to say that the need was mutual. If the academies needed art theory to stake their claim to high-minded practice, then art theory, in the form described above, needed the academies to codify and lend authority to its pronouncements. By the end of the sixteenth century the academies of Florence and Rome had begun to spawn imitators (although their most successful protégé, the French academy, would not be founded until 1648). These academies almost all codified an instruction based on the model of the selective imitation of nature and with reference to antique prototypes, and on the importance of theoretic instruction separate from art practice which, with increasing vehemence, was seen as an essentially mechanical procedure. But there was another way in which these theories may be said to be "academic." Academic theory aimed for exclusivity. Its practitioners came from the educated elite, and its audience was likewise select, able to distinguish (or so the academies liked to believe) between the superficial appeal of a brilliant technique and the more fundamental, if subtle, application of ideas to art. And

it followed from this that artists must likewise be learned in order to appeal to this select, educated, audience (Blunt, 1989, p. 148).

While this doctrine supported artists in their endeavor to be taken as practitioners of a learned profession, in the long run the codification of practice became a straitjacket constraining the academic artist to one kind of practice and (as we will see in the next section of this chapter), one genre. This rigid and limiting code, at once formulaic and conventional, ossified into a dogma that left artists with little freedom of expression. It is therefore unsurprising that, toward the end of the seventeenth century, new developments in academic theory moved the discussion back to questions surrounding artistic expression and license. Once again these questions tended to group around the relative importance of line (design) and color in the articulation of an artistic concept, and the significance of nature was once again seen as a guide not a hindrance to artistic expression. This change of direction, typified by the writings of Roger de Piles (1635–1709) in books such as *L'Abrégé de la vie des peintres* (1699) and *Cours de peinture par principes* (1708), is most often characterized by the ascendancy of the example of Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and the colorist faction, and the (relative) demotion of Nicolas Poussin (1593/4–1665) and the *disegno* school.

Allied to this shift is the concept of native genius. The academies had always acknowledged that occasional bursts of native distinction were an allowable transcendence of their rule-dominated notion of artistic excellence (an excellence that was almost entirely attributable, so the academies believed, to a rigorous and pragmatic training). But the idea of genius that grew up under the influence of ancient treatises such as *Longinus on the Sublime* was antithetical not only to the idea that art could be learned, but also to the doctrine of *ut pictura poesis* which based its claim to significance on a universal understanding of what constituted an important artistic statement. Under the circumstances a doctrine which denied the teachability of art, rejected universalizing rules in favor of an emphasis on the imagination, the expression of emotion, and a profoundly subjective approach to beauty, was obviously hostile to the academic project (Lee, 1967, p. 68).

Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the appeal to reason which forms the very center of academic theory in the period under review should become the most contested aspect of later academic theory. This shift in emphasis, which tended to free art from the increasingly prescriptive confines of the humanistic theory of painting to embrace the concerns of color and the example of the Venetian school, was followed at some years remove by the most cogent attack on the fundamental assumption of the doctrine of *ut pictura poesis* – that painting and poetry were united in sharing a common goal in imitating ideal human nature. The essay by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81) "Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry" argued for acknowledgment that painting and poetry differed in their means of expression, and that each should observe the limitations imposed by their respective mediums. This

is not to say that Lessing was a revolutionary who denied the importance of the hierarchy of genres – indeed he would have agreed with the most traditional theorists that art that did not imitate human action at its most perfect was deficient in understanding – but he objected to the confusion of art and literature for ends that were nothing to do with the problems that were particular to art, but everything to do with the need for artists to adopt the language of the poets to make good their claim to a seat at the liberal arts table (Lee, 1967, pp. 20–1).

While Lessing's attack on the confusion of the arts of poetry and painting served to articulate a shift in art theory back from the abject imitation of poetry to a more self-aware position where the limits of each medium could be once again acknowledged, it should be noted that Lessing never denied the premise that the highest goal of art was to imitate human action. Following Lessing, the last great exponent of academic doctrine in our period was Joshua Reynolds (1723–92), whose undogmatic and enlightened exposition of the humanistic theory of painting in his *Discourses on Art* (see Reynolds, 1809) stands as a monument of good advice to the academic artist. Using his annual address to the Royal Academy as his platform, Reynolds examined each of the "parts" of painting that fell within the purview of the academic tradition, while infusing them with a sensibility that did much to redress a balance that had tipped toward empty formalism. His argument is that the association of painting with poetry rests, as he expounds in his third Discourse, not on borrowed precepts, or in the supposed similarity of their means of expression, but in the "nobleness of conception" that "gives to painting its true dignity, which entitles it to the name of a liberal art and ranks it as the sister of poetry" (Lee, 1967, p. 69).

Implicit in much of what has been said above is the view that for artists to be accepted as learned, discerning, and knowledgeable, they must produce work that exhibits these same qualities. The development of history painting would allow academic artists to deploy their talents on a terrain far larger than the seemingly restricted field of guild practice. And while the idea that guild artists were mere craftsmen who struggled to find expression among a sea of pattern books and workshop formulae is an outrageous travesty of the truth (guild artists were every bit as skilled and enlightened as their academic cousins), the academies, by emphasizing the discursive aspects of artmaking, sought to disenfranchise nonacademic artists from participation in what we might term the "grand genre" of history painting. For all these reasons, and coterminous with the creation of the academies (themselves eloquent testimony to this same desire for more social and professional consideration), art theory addressed the question of what kinds of work would enhance artists' claim to greater prestige. From this reasoning grew the importance of history painting. It is unsurprising, therefore, that history painting plays a crucial role in academic theory, at once giving form to the academies' more abstract pronouncements and offering artists a bastion from which they could look down on the less elevated genres below.

History Painting

History painting (*historia*, Lat.: "story") is the genre that ties art theory to its institutional context in the academies on the one hand, and to art practice on the other. As early as 1435 Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) had used, in his treatise on painting *De pictura*, the term *historia* to describe a narrative painting of several figures, usually engaged in some weighty drama drawn from the classics, the Bible, or classical mythology. He argued that painting of this type could demonstrate its standing as a liberal art when it associated its aims and methods with those of literature. This meant that the rhetorical categories of decorum, composition, invention, expression, conceit, to mention a few of the most important, should be employed in a composition that fully displayed not only the artist's skill in the depiction of men and women engaged in dramatic action, but also his mastery of the lesser genres of landscape, still life, and animals.

This formulation of what constituted significant painting so firmly took root that when the French art theorist André Félibien (1619–95), writing in 1667, echoes Alberti, his distinction between narrative and nonnarrative representation has the sound of an accepted formula:

> Painters represent many things, such as landscapes, animals, buildings and human figures. The most noble of all these [kinds of painting] is that which represents a History in a composition of several figures. (Pace, 1981, p. 47)

Let us note the significance of Félibien's distinction between genre painting and history painting – between "high" (narrative) and "low" (representational) painting. Put most simply, it is a distinction between two incommensurate forms of depiction; between painting which is the result, so those sympathetic to the academic position argued, of an intellectual process, and painting which takes as its model the appearance of things in nature, with all the unfortunate oddities and unsalutory manifestations of imperfection such a practice implies. The opposition, then, was important precisely because the academies wished to assert that their privileged pictorial form (the meta-genre of history painting) had a function beyond the merely mimetic. For then it could be demonstrated that painting was an essentially cerebral activity, worthy of inclusion among the elevated or "liberal" arts.

Since much of the authority of history painting rested on the considered application of the rules of literature to the visual field of painting, we should not be surprised to find that the principle rules in *An Idea of the Perfection of Painting* (1668) by Roland Fréart de Chambray (1606–76) are that "in historical composures the pure and rigid truth be always observed," and "that there be great consideration had of the place where 'tis to be represented" (Lee, 1967, pp. 44–5). Félibien likewise showed his concern to guide the painter toward decorous compositions when he writes:

> What one calls in a painting History or Myth is the imitation of some action which has taken place in the past, or could have taken place between several people; but one must take care to ensure that in a painting there is only one subject; and although it may be filled with a great many figures, each must be in rapport with the main action. (Félibien, 1669, n.p.)

As will be immediately seen, these definitions of the *genre historique* go well beyond identifying history painting as an art which merely draws its subject from antiquity or the classics. Rather Félibien's comments show the purposiveness of this kind of painting. It is painting with an end in view – the raising of painting up to a par with the "liberal arts." As such, history painting is from the first a matter of choices: choice of subject, choice of treatment, choice of composition. The history painter shows his skill, not in the illusionistic portrayal of the here and now, but in the judicious representation of heroic actions of the past.

The result of this concentration on history painting was that art theory, which had always been single-minded in its association with art and literature, further narrowed its scope to focus exclusively on history painting as the only genre worthy of serious interest. When other genres were discussed, the result was often unwittingly condemnatory. Even an enthusiastic supporter of genre painting like Eugène Fromentin (1820–76) answered his own question "What motive had a Dutch painter in painting a picture?" with the bleak answer "None" (Fromentin, 1948, p. 97). Genre painting (that is, any painting which is not *history*) is painting made without the intervention of the intellect, and its practitioners were constrained to operate within the preordained field of mimesis. Reynolds drew pretty much the same conclusion in the journal of his travels in Flanders and Holland:

> As the merit [of Dutch painting] consists in the truth of representation alone, whatever praise they deserve, whatever pleasure they give when under the eye, they make but a poor figure in description. (Reynolds, 1809, vol. 2, p. 369)

Reynolds's remarks typify the point of view of the academic artist. It is only the conceptual field of history painting that offers the potential for a radically liberated kind of representation (one that was open to discursive interpretation), other genres simply did not have this potential. But we should also note one potential problem with Reynolds's position. His praise of discursive painting implies that significant painting *requires* a textual supplement in order to reveal itself fully to mind – an interesting, and dangerous, assumption about the role of theory not to explain but to complete the artwork's meaning.

These remarks epitomize the academies' desire to inscribe extrapictorial meaning onto the figural field of artmaking, and with it the opportunity to gain the ascendancy over those who functioned under a different pictorial paradigm. To do this, history painting would have to shun not only traditional practices and attitudes, but also those (lower) genres whose approach implied a more

unthinking fidelity to nature – and that meant effectively everything that fell outside the depiction of stories from the classics or the Bible. For the protagonists of the academic system of the arts, the authority of painting is found in a certain kind of subject represented in a certain kind of way.

This need for judicious selection is evident in many of the debates that took place within academic theory over the way an artist should represent the subject of a history painting. Poussin was implicated in one such debate that took place within the forum of the monthly lectures – the so-called *conférences* – in the French Academy in the 1660s, when his *Eliezer and Rebecca* was criticized for deviating from biblical truth, in that the ten camels in the caravan led by Eliezer were not present, even though the Bible makes explicit reference to them. While certain members of the Academy argued that the painter had no right to meddle with the story, others, led by the head of the Academy Charles Le Brun (1619–90), maintained that Poussin was justified because he had excluded an animal that would detract from the gravity of the narrative and in doing so had attained a higher truth than mere historical accuracy (Lee, 1967, p. 45).

The legitimacy of the argument rests on the association of painting with poetry. The painter was no more at liberty to abdicate responsibility for good judgment than was the poet – indeed, perhaps more so as poetry allowed for the glossing over of the distasteful or the ugly through the operation of language, whereas art, as an essentially mimetic medium, was obliged to represent them. As Charles-Alphonse Dufresnoy (1611–68) explained in his *Observations on Painting*:

> As the poet only invents or puts into verse that which is beautiful to sing and to hear, so the painter will take from a history only those parts that are appealing, or offer him the chance to show all the elegances and artifices of painting; so long, that is, as he does not depart in any way from what the poet would have written. (Thuillier, 1965, p. 198)

It is therefore on the basis of art's association with poetry that academic theory ultimately rests. What is important for the poet becomes, in this system, important for the painting, and what the poet must avoid, the painter likewise need eschew.

In the end, however, what history painting offered the academies is less a limiting and restrictive set of rules than the possibility of the renewal of an aesthetic. For academic artists history painting was an enabling device, opening up art practice to change and development in a way which existing practices did not. In this sense, history painting offered a certain group of artists, as different as Poussin, Annibale Carracci (1560–1609), and Rubens, and who stylistically cannot be considered at all similar, the opportunity to forge an alliance against practices which they believed were demonstrably alien to their way of thinking. This is not to say that there was nothing to distinguish the paintings of Rubens, Poussin, and Carracci from each other, only that certain values, such as what

could or could not be included in a painting without compromising its character as a history painting. In the end, history painting demonstrated its position as the embodiment of the humanistic theory of painting as much through what it excluded as through what was included, and its artists likewise had to understand and respect these limits, for they were limits that the painter could not transgress and still be considered learned.

Theoretical Production

Unlike the theorists of the Early Renaissance, who believed that theoretical discussion could help an artist to a better understanding of the art of painting, the later theorists went much further in advocating not only that art could be taught through theory. but that such rules were indispensable. Theoretical handbooks such as Lomazzo's *Trattato dell'Arte della Pittura, Scultura et Architettura* [Treatise on the Arts of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture] of 1584 and *De' Veri Precetti della Pittura* [Veritable Maxims of Painting] of 1586 by Giovanni Battista Armenini (1525–1609) – the very names of which tell us their writers saw such theorizing as "the unchangeable foundation of art" – established a pattern of fidelity to more or less inflexible guidelines that greatly influenced the theorists of the next century (Blunt, 1989, p. 148).

Indeed, with these treatises art theory assumes a new and vigorous place *prior* to practice. These codified rules or "precepts" were designed to guide artists on every aspect of artmaking – and, where necessary, legislate between differing points of view. More damagingly, academic artists tended to see the creative process as fundamentally intellectual, and their reliance on elucidating the specifics of practice through a general and necessarily ambiguous theory of representation further sundered what had hitherto been unified. The French academy's secretary Henri Testelin admitted as much when he described instruction in the academy's art school:

> Beginning with particulars, [the professors] moved on to more general observations which imperceptibly turned into knowledgeable and enlightening discussions on the principles of drawing, on imitation, on the way of improving and ennobling nature through the beauties of Antiquity, on the character and merit of the great masters of the Roman and Bologna schools, finally on anything that had relevance to the fundamentals of the Fine Arts. (Testelin, 1853, vol. 1, p. 93)

The problem might not have been so serious had the academies not staked their claim to credibility precisely on the promise that they would explain practice through theory. Theoretical discussion can proceed without undue difficulty, to the benefit of all concerned, so long as no one believes that it is a program, let alone a prerequisite, for practice. Yet this is just what happened. Between the two positions – commentary on aesthetic questions and a practical program for

the guidance of like-minded artists – theoretical discussion often took on an alarmingly abstract quality more suited to debate in an academy of philosophy than one devoted to the practice of painting.

From the first the academies had placed theoretical discussion at the center of the activities. Often framed as a weekly or monthly "lecture" followed by a discussion, the purpose of these meetings was for members to "exchange their insights [on art], it not being possible that one individual should possess them all, nor to penetrate without help all the difficulties of these arts so profound and so little known," as the statutes of the new Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture in Paris put it in 1648 (Vitet, 1880, p. 214).

This is not to say that art theorists believed that art could be taught in its entirety; they simply behaved as if it could. While no theorist ever went so far as to deny that talent or natural genius was an indispensable prerequisite to the making of great art, they treated this assumption as a starting point for skill-building, not as a reason for ignoring teachable skills in the first place. But while the artist-theorists of the earlier Renaissance, such as Alberti and Leonardo, regarded art theory as a means of offering practical advice to the artist, later theorists treated theory as necessary. In part this was the result of a split between the applied rules of art based on observation, and what we might call the absolute rules of art based on the intellect. It followed from this that an art theory divorced from experience was not in a position to respond to the needs of artists. Instead of seeing rules as the means to communicate the *practice* of art, rules became the tool of those artists whose view of art practice divorced theory and practice, elevating some parts of practice (such as drawing) onto a higher plane than others (for example, painting), with a view to raising the status of the artist into a quasi-affinity with the liberal arts. And instead of an evolving set of rules based on experimentation and the direct observation of nature, artists now looked to other artists of the past as the ultimate source of authority (Blunt, 1989, pp. 149–50).

The theory of imitation has a long and complicated history. Most often discussed in terms of Horace's celebrated simile "*ut pictura poesis*" ("as is painting, so is poetry"), the imitation in question was that of idealized humanity "raised above all that is local and accidental, purged of all that is abnormal and eccentric, so as to be in the highest sense representative" (Babbitt, 1910, p. 10). In the period under discussion the academies may be fairly represented as the institutional embodiment of this theory that based its claim to significance on the association of art and literature, validated by their shared interest in imitation. Inevitably this resulted in the view that narrative was the principal object of the artist. From Alberti to Reynolds artists and theorists insisted that it was the business of painters not merely to depict things as they appeared to the eye (the imitation of nature), but to educate their audience through the representation of significant narratives drawn from ancient history and mythology. As Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68) explained, to do otherwise "is the straight way to Dutch forms and figures" – in other words back to the direct imitation of

nature that was anathema to academic theory – while to imitate the antique "leads to general beauty, and its ideal images, and is the way the Greeks took" (Irwin, 1972, p. 61).

The finality implicit in Winckelmann's statement had been present in academic theory for some time when he wrote these words in the 1750s. Indeed, it had been the cornerstone of academic theory since at least the middle of the seventeenth century. The approach reaches its apogee – or possibly nadir – in treatises like that of Lomazzo, who fills seven hundred pages with solutions, based on antique prototypes, to every artistic problem imaginable (Blunt, 1989, p. 152), and those produced within the French academy, such as Testelin's *Sentimen[t]s des plus habiles peintres sur la pratique de la peinture et sculpture*, published in 1696.

As we might expect, there is more at stake than a simple choice between the imitation of nature and the art of the past. While the first position implies the artist copies things as they appear in the world (and accepts their imperfections), the second sets out to improve on nature, eradicating imperfections and seeking to show, not how the world is, but how it might be. Crucially for our understanding of academic theory, the first position tended to be associated with the realm of the artisan, while the latter was associated with the Italianate model of practice and more specifically with the art academies of late sixteenth-century Florence and Rome.

The critic Ludovico Dolce (1508–68) attempted to resolve this dilemma – and find a possible way out of the nature–art divide – by distinguishing between human nature and nonhuman nature. We might say that, along with antiquity, the seventeenth century may applaud Zeuxis for painting grapes so realistically that birds might fly down to peck at them (illusionism), but when we wish to paint the unsurpassed beauty of Helen, then, like Zeuxis, the artist must select the most beautiful parts of a number of women to make one Helen (ideal beauty). There was however another position, one of great interest to an Academy seeking an essentially practical solution to this age-old paradox. As antiquity had produced humans of such perfection that one model could be used to represent the highest form of human beauty, so the modern artist should copy not the example, but the very manifestation of antique beauty, for as Dolce remarks, "the ancient statues contain all the perfection of art" (Goldstein, 1988, p. 35).

Of the two approaches – assembling the most beautiful elements into a whole that surpassed nature, or "seeing nature through the antique" – the academies, perhaps because of their need to offer a graspable method that students of art could readily employ, favored the latter. Yet imitation, even judicious imitation, is not the same thing as emulation. Most artists, confused by the somewhat unhelpful distinction, chose to regard imitation of the antique as simply copying antique statues. They were encouraged in this by their teachers who placed inordinate weight on a select few models that were expected to bear the full weight of prestige accorded to antiquity. As the sculptor Gerard van Opstal (1594/1604–68) argued in a lecture to the French academy on the *Laocoon* in 1667: '[By] study of this [sculpture] one could learn to correct even the faults

that are ordinarily found in nature, because in it everything appeared in a state of perfection" (Félibien, 1669, pp. 31–2).

Van Opstal's approach is fraught with danger for the well-being of a constructive theory of imitation. While both Poussin and Rubens – the two artists the Academy liked to think of as representing polemical attitudes to painting – studied the antique extensively, neither practiced the slavish imitation advocated here. Rubens, in his short essay *De imitatione statuarum*, written about 1608 but first published by de Piles a century later, specifically warned that excessive imitation would serve only to crush native creativity. Significantly, Rubens did not accept the suggestion that an artist should copy the whole work, but imitate only those parts worthy of esteem (the moot question, of course, was who was to say what was worthy of esteem). This selective theory of imitation, in which the artist interrogates the art of the past, offers the potential for dialogue, not unquestioned acceptance.

Some artists were best avoided. But not every Old Master could provide the model for emulation from which the students might learn. Fréart de Chambray contrasts the decorum of Raphael (1483–1520) – always a favorite model for academic emulation – to the *terribilità* of Michelangelo whose forceful and highly personal work he sees as an undesirable model:

> Michael-Angelo, superior in Fame, but far inferior to him in Merits, shall by his extravagant Compositions, amply furnish us to discover the Ignorance and Temerity of those libertines, who trampling all the Rules and Maxims of Art under their feet, pursue only their own Caprices. (Fréart de Chambray, 1668, preface)

These remarks on the theory of imitation perhaps indicate something of the nature of the problem facing the Academy. While imitation of nature unmediated by the example of the antique was, for reasons already expounded, out of the question, the imitation of nature through the antique likewise posed a threat to the autonomy of the artist. Not least, imitation of the art of the past might look, to the disinterested observer, remarkably like the unthinking copying of appearances that the academies held to be the hallmark of the artisan. It was recognized, however, that slavish imitation of the antique could lead to sterility and an unhealthy veneration of the art of the past. The French academician Philippe de Champaigne (1602–74) argued, in a lecture of 1672, that those who base their art on the slavish imitation of antiquity "subject their genius to one style, instead of which they should be taking whatever is the most beautiful from every style and making . . . a beauty which is their own" (Champaigne, 1672, ms. 156).

Conclusion

Up to this point in the discussion the reader may be forgiven for thinking that art theory was a burdensome necessity artists were obliged to shoulder in order to emancipate themselves from the supposedly artisanal practices of pre-

academic association. The choice of terrain on which to fight was the putative status of painting as a liberal art, and the justification for art theory was to overcome the barriers of prejudice erected against painting as a "mechanical" art. This belief informed the entire development of academic theory throughout the period under review, and persuaded academicians that progress in the arts was dependent on understanding and adopting a set of discursive practices which were, for the most part, alien to the business of picture-making. But what then, if anything, had been achieved by all this theory?

While there is certainly an element of truth in the view that theory could be regarded, on occasion, as little more than a weapon in the armory of academic artists who used it to affirm the legitimacy of their social and professional aspirations, it would be a gross exaggeration to see theoretical discussion as being no more than a convenient excuse to associate the Fine Arts with the other liberal arts. In fact the role of theory was far more radical. Its principal contribution to the arts was actively to participate in the elaboration of the hierarchy of genres, and consequently contribute to the separation of painting into categories according to subject. This strategy, stemming from the association of art and literature, opened the way for artists to assert their independence from what many regarded as a merely mimetic practice, and by extension from the skill-based qualities that were argued to be the attributes of the artisan.

While this chapter has been at pains to emphasize that such a binary – between Fine Art and craft, narrative and description, picture-making and decoration – is a gross oversimplification resulting from academic theory's insistence that it alone held the key to significant artmaking, it produced a set of precepts that may properly be called a discourse on art. Furthermore, theoretical production had, despite many false turns, enjoyed a steady development. By the end of the period in question it offered a well-thought-out path to those who aspired to become significant artists – or at least practitioners of a significant genre – and it could point to a proven record of artistic excellence and an assured terrain for the practice of the Fine Arts.

But there were also disadvantages. Artists, in shaping their practice to fit theories that were often borrowed from literature, seriously compromised the integrity of their discipline. While much art theory had offered artists the security of a model endorsed (so it was argued) by antiquity, it undermined artists' will to explore the limits of their discipline, or to innovate beyond a necessary obligation to vary the tried and tested formulae. Buttressed by the authority of antiquity, academic art practice became sterile. For those who operated under its aegis the long-term consequences would be catastrophic. Unable to recognize the potential for the Fine Arts to transform reality, they settled for a tired and repetitive reiteration of the now moribund values which had sustained art a century earlier. (These values were not moribund because they looked to the past, but because they were no longer needed for professional advancement.)

In tracing this brief history of academic art theory, there has been throughout a danger of taking cause for effect. It may appear that art theory was an

unnecessary burden on many artists, and talking about it an even greater burden. Observing this, we might wish to conclude that the sole purpose of academic theory was to gain the protection it afforded against incursions by the theoretically unlettered. There has been enough said above to suggest that this cynical view is not without an element of truth. Yet it will not do to measure the importance of the academic theory of art. Few artists, in the final analysis, *needed* to devote so much energy to such recondite matters, yet many seemed willing to do so, and produced art that could, with a fair degree of truth, be said to be learned. Ultimately academic theory was not the adjunct of practice, but the underlying condition for a certain kind of practice, and it is in this that its importance lies.

Of course, such a view is difficult to prove, and the evidence to the contrary may appear compelling. But unless we wish to believe that the practice of art theory was no more than an exercise in academic self-promotion, then we are constrained to believe that it was elaborated for the better understanding of the kind of art – history painting – that many regarded as not only the *ne plus ultra* of significant practice but also the prerequisite for serious candidacy of the profession among the liberal arts.

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Chapter 8

Rhetorical Categories in the Academy

Caroline van Eck

Introduction

A large majority of European artists have passed through an academy. Understanding their teaching is therefore crucial to any insight into the development of the visual arts from the Renaissance until the end of the nineteenth century, the period in which the academies were most influential in the training of artists. Until recently, the study of the academies has suffered from a negative bias which goes back to the Romantic cult of genius and originality and the conviction that artistic excellence cannot be taught. The first modern historian of the academy was Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, whose highly influential *Academies of Art, Past and Present* of 1940 was a social and institutional history concentrating on the organization and administration of the academies. Alfred Boime's *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (1971), in contrast, discussed the art produced in the French Académie, and demonstrates its importance to all artists of the period, traditionalists and members of the avant-garde alike. In its wake, a series of studies appeared, including monographs devoted to one particular academy, such as Wazbinski's *L'Accademia Medicea del Disegno a Firenze nel Cinquecento* (1987), and most recently Karen-edis Barzman's *The Florentine Academy and the Early Modern State: The Discipline of Disegno* (2000); collections of essays like Anton Boschloo's *Academies of Art between Renaissance and Romanticism* (1989) which discuss the major European academies; and one general study concentrating on the teaching of the academies: Carl Goldstein's *Teaching Art: Academies and Schools from Vasari to Albers* (1996). The French Académie has continued to draw attention, which resulted in books such as Norman Bryson's *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (1981) and Michael Fried's *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980), both of which have been much discussed not only among academy specialists, but by art historians in general. Both Bryson's and Goldstein's books draw attention to a number of issues that are part of current debates about the ways in

which we consider art, the practice of art history, the relation between theory and practice and the relation between language and art – both in the sense of art considered in itself as a form of communication, and the relations between art and the critical discourses around it.

It is not easy to establish precisely the nature of the doctrines held and taught by the academies, because the sources are very fragmented. In fact, the major sources, such as Zuccaro and Bellori's discourses on *Idea* for the Roman *Accademia di San Luca*, the *Conférences* of the French Académie, and Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses*, are not the textual residue of the teaching that actually went on, but transcriptions of speeches directed at fellow academicians and the public. This is not merely a matter of historical inquiry, of finding the appropriate sources. It is part of a far-reaching methodological problem in art history. As the various foundation statutes show, it is clear that academies functioned as didactic institutions, and clearly saw theory as part of their teaching programme. But if there is very little written evidence of actual teaching in theoretical matters, must we then conclude that there was no teaching in theory, or can we turn to the evidence of the works of art produced in these academies? But in that case, how do we value visual versus written sources, and how do we relate verbal to visual evidence?

Underlying this methodological problem there is the issue of the relation between theory and practice: did the academies formulate any theory, or did they simply provide instruction in drawing, linear perspective and anatomy? If they did make theory explicit, how did this relate to actual practice? Some authors have claimed that theoretical writings published in the context of the Florentine Academy are completely irrelevant to what the artists of that institution did; others incline to the view that the formulation of a coherent body of theory was its most important achievement (Barzman, 1988). If, as some authors believe, theory was irrelevant to actual practice, what does this say about current understanding of theory and its relation with practice?

The relation of theory and practice points to an even wider issue, namely that between language and art. The terms, concepts, categories and principles used for academic discussions of the visual arts were taken mainly from rhetoric, the theory of persuasive communication developed in classical antiquity from the fifth century BC onwards. Classical rhetoric was not just a set of instructions on successful speaking in public. Instead, it offered its students a training in persuasive civilized communication in general. It did not restrict itself to language only, but studied all kinds of human expression from the point of view of persuasion. Both because of its broad scope and because it was the only reasonably complete theory of human communication available at the time, rhetoric was used from the beginning of the Renaissance by humanists such as Leon Battista Alberti to formulate theories of the visual arts and architecture. But the use of rhetoric as the prime model for artistic theory itself introduces a number of issues that, though rarely discussed, influenced academic theory: is art in itself a language? Does art have a vocabulary, syntax and semantics in the way

languages have? Can art be learned, taught and understood in ways that are similar to the acquisition, teaching and use of languages (Van Eck, 2001)?

These questions bring us to a final issue: the ways the academies defined art. The existence of the academies was based on two assumptions that go very much against the grain of commonly held present-day views of art. In the first place, art could be taught. Secondly, art was a kind of communication; its purpose was to delight, instruct and move, and thereby to convey the views held by a painter or their client in the most persuasive manner conceivable. The academies did not exist for the sake of art itself, but to promote the supremacy of the ruler of the country. Both premises are intricately bound up with rhetoric.

The Academies: Organization and Teaching

The first academy was founded by Plato in Athens in 385 BC as a centre for philosophy and science and as a school. Its revival in the 1460s in Florence, supported by the Medici, was the result of renewed interest in Plato's Dialogues. Early humanist academies were mainly devoted to the study of ancient culture and letters: in the Aldine Academy, founded in Venice in 1500 by the publisher Aldus Manutius, Greek had to be spoken and Greek literature was to be promoted. The Roman Academy founded by the humanist Pomponio Leto in the mid-fifteenth century concentrated on studying Roman antiquity. Loosely organized groups of artists and pupils, such as the 'school' directed by Bertoldo in the Medici gardens in the late fifteenth century attended by Michelangelo, and the *Accademia Vinciana*, a circle around Leonardo da Vinci in Milan, may be regarded as the precursors of the academies of art founded in the sixteenth century (see Hale, 1992, s.v. 'Academies').

The first academy of art, the Florentine *Accademia del Disegno*, was founded in 1562, on the initiative of Grand Duke Cosimo I of Tuscany. Many towns in Italy and the rest of Europe followed in the next two centuries. The most important academies, both in terms of consistently delivered teaching programmes and artistic prestige were those of Rome, Paris (including its Roman branch at the Villa Medici) and London. Their purpose was to raise the standards of painting by providing instruction in its principles, with the ultimate aim of elevating painting from its traditional status of a mechanical art or craft to that of a liberal art, based on a number of clearly stated general principles (Van Eck, 1998a). The second purpose was to give artistic support to the claims of the city or state to political supremacy. The foundation of the *Accademia del Disegno* was part of Duke Cosimo I's policy of supporting Florence's political supremacy by affirming its cultural supremacy. Its purpose was to show that its members were the true inheritors of the glorious past of Florence, where the rebirth of classical culture and art had begun with Brunelleschi and Masaccio, and culminated in Michelangelo's achievements. Similarly, the main purpose of the French

Académie royale de peinture, founded in 1648, was to proclaim the supremacy of French art, and thereby to support Louis XIV's claims to absolute rule.

The main subjects taught were geometry and linear perspective, drawing from the nude, anatomy, and some varieties of what we would now call artistic theory. The *Accademia Ambrosiana* in Milan, for instance, offered a programme including the composition of colours, Biblical history and literature, anatomy, copying of Old Masters, drawing from the nude and competitions, but also instruction in the arrangement of masses and figures and in the representation of emotions according to the rules of good *disegno*, truth and decorum (Jones, P. M. 'Federico Borromeo's Ambrosian Collection as a teaching facility', in Boschloo, 1989, p. 50). The founding statutes of practically all academies stipulated that some attention should be given to theoretical issues. It seems that in the sixteenth century these efforts did not always result in a systematic teaching programme on theoretical matters. The most consistent theoretical statements began to be formulated from the 1650s onwards. Giovanni Pietro Bellori's discourse on *Idea*, held on award-giving day in 1664, and published in 1672 as a preface to his *Vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti moderni*, is the crystallization of a century of classicist theorizing about art, and became paradigmatic for academies in Italy and abroad.

From its foundation in 1648, the explicitly stated aim of the French Académie was to provide for the teaching of art as a liberal discipline. Monthly discussions or *conférences* were held, devoted to one particular painting or a particular issue such as light or colour. These were held by one of the Académiciens for an audience consisting of their fellow members and the public. This tradition continued well into the nineteenth century, and the transcriptions offer an important source for French academic doctrine. In fact, these discussions by major French painters such as Philippe de Champaigne, Sébastien Bourdon, Charles Lebrun and others of paintings by Raphael, Titian, Veronese and Poussin offer very illuminating critical appraisals of the use of colour, the handling of light, composition, the relation between a painting and its verbal source, or the expression of the passions.

Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses* (held from 1769 until 1790) are the main source for the theoretical teaching of the Royal Academy of Arts in London. The aim of this academy was to provide teaching in design on a regular basis for students, and to organize an annual exhibition that would be open to all 'artists of distinguished merit'. It was open to painters, sculptors and architects, men and women alike, although women were not allowed to be present at the life-drawing classes. More in particular, it set out to promote history painting, traditionally considered the highest genre in painting, but with no tradition to speak of in Great Britain, and to find a compromise between the demands of portrait painting, which was very popular, and the virtues and prestige of history painting. As a consequence, history painting would be the focus for the Academy, and a corresponding teaching programme had to be developed. Within this programme the Academy lectures played a very important role. Although they were

held not only by Reynolds, but also by James Barry, Heinrich Fuseli, Sir John Soane and William Turner, the *Discourses* offer the most clear and complete version of this teaching programme and its theoretical principles. In fact, together with the *Conférences* of the French Académie these Academy lectures offer the most accessible and consistent formulation of academic doctrine.

Rhetorical Categories in the Teaching of the Academies

According to the academic view art can be learned. Talent is essential, but without instruction it will lead to nothing. The practice of painting obeys various general rules and principles. Imitation was the main instrument of academic teaching. Both the works of nature, above all the human body, and masterworks from the past, in particular the masters of the High Renaissance, Raphael and Michelangelo, served as models that had to be copied assiduously. Of course seeing these works with one's own eyes was to be preferred, but since, until to the end of the eighteenth century, when the first public museums were opened, many famous works of art were only visible to a very select group of persons, most students had to be content with copying engravings made after these works (Goldstein, 1996, pp. 80–7). A proficiency in the imitation of Old Masters was essential to attain the ultimate aim of the teaching of the academies: the acquisition of Grand Manner, or what Reynolds called the Grand Style, and the French Académie *le beau idéal*.

Academic doctrine was also characterized by the conviction that all the arts were intimately linked to each other. Horace's famous tag *ut pictura poesis* is the most famous expression of this conviction. The doctrine of the sister arts linked poetry and painting; but in its more extended sense, as expressed for instance by Cicero, all the visual arts were seen as related to each other and to the liberal arts, in particular to rhetoric and mathematics (Cicero *De oratore* III.21; see also Vitruvius *De architectura libri X* [*Ten Books on Architecture*] I.i.2.) Accordingly, painting was often compared to language; and like language, it should move. In the words of Sir Joshua Reynolds:

> The powers exerted in the mechanical part of the Art have been called *the language of painters*; but we may say, it is but poor eloquence which only shows that the orator can talk. Words should be employed as the means, not as the end; language is the instrument, conviction is the work. (Reynolds, *Discourse* IV, p. 124)

Thus the doctrine of the sister arts served as a basis for claims that painting was entitled to the same intellectual and social status as the liberal arts. But it also enabled those who wanted to formulate theories about the arts (beginning with Vitruvius on architecture in the first century AD) to make use of the liberal arts in their own work. Where linear perspective and proportion theories were concerned, theorists turned to mathematics; but for the general conceptual framework, they often turned to rhetoric.

Classical rhetoric was not merely a set of instructions on successful speaking in public. Instead, it offered its students a training in persuasive civilized communication in general. It did not restrict itself to language only, but studied all kinds of human expression from the point of view of persuasion. From the early Renaissance onwards, it took a central place in the European school curriculum; instruction in it was extremely thorough, and stressed writing and speaking skills rather than passive knowledge. Rhetoric determined the ways in which people spoke in public, read and thought. It also offered a teaching system corresponding to its analysis of the writing process, a vocabulary to discuss the arts, in particular the concept of style, and models for writing about the visual arts. An important factor was the general nature of rhetoric: though mainly devoted to the persuasive use of language, classical rhetoric possessed a number of features, such as its stress on visualization, that facilitated its use in theories about the visual arts.

Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* [*On the Training of an Orator*] (first century AD), which had been read avidly since its rediscovery in 1416 by the Italian humanist Poggio Bracciolini, is a treatise on the training of the orator. Because of this didactic focus, its precepts could easily be used as well in other disciplines. According to the teaching method set out in the *Institutio oratoria*, the student should first study examples of good oratory, and copy them in a notebook (called a 'commonplace book'); next came small writing exercises, such as letters or descriptions, on a given topic; finally he should write entire speeches. In doing so, he should always imitate the passages he had copied down in his commonplace book or adapt these to the particular conditions of his own text. In the final stage of his training, having perfected his knowledge and technique, he would be able to surpass these examples. This teaching method by means of the imitation of selected models, which would then function as a repertoire or stock of turns of phrase and entire passages, was taken over by the academies. Leonardo da Vinci, and many artists after him, advised the student to fill a notebook with studies of figures, draperies, facial expressions and antique sculptures, which the student would later use in his mature work. (See for instance Cicero *De oratore* III.117–51 and Alberti *De pictura* §61. For Leonardo's use of a commonplace book see Zwijnenberg, 1999, pp. 20ff.) Similarly, the student of painting would proceed from drawings of details of the human figure to studies after the live model in the same kind of graduated exercise as the student of rhetoric.

The rhetorical analysis of the writing process was taken over by the academies to describe the process of painting. In this analysis five stages were distinguished: (a) invention, defining the subject of the speech and finding material for it; (b) disposition, ordering it in a logical and persuasive way; (c) elocution, choosing the appropriate stylistic level, figures of speech and tropes which would fit the subject, the situation and the public and contribute to the success of the speech; (d) memory, learning the speech by heart; and (e) action, the delivery of the speech with the appropriate gestures, facial expression, dress and bearing (Quintilian *Institutio oratoria* III.iii.1). During the entire process the orator should be

guided by considerations of *decorum*: everything he says, his choice of words, his behaviour and his dress should be led by consideration of the subject, the occasion, the location of his speech, the public and his relation with it (Aristotle *Rhetorica* III.7; Quintilian *Institutio oratoria* I.v.1, VIII.i.2, XI.i and XII.x.58ff; and Cicero *De oratore* III.ix.38). The first three stages were taken over in academic theory: the painting process was divided into a stage of selecting the subject matter, which was often taken from the Bible or classical poets (invention), a stage of ordering the figures and objects (disposition or composition), and a final stage of deciding on the right style of the painting, the use of colour, the gestures used, and the handling of drapery (elocution). The use of gestures was often modelled on the descriptions of gestures and their meaning in Cicero and Quintilian: the gestures they advised to express horror, astonishment or admiration were employed by Raphael and Poussin, for instance. Like the orator, the painter should be guided by decorum: he should give his personages the dress, bearing and gestures appropriate to their rank, he should not depict coarse subjects, and he should consider the intended public.

This brief discussion of the rhetorical analysis of the writing process has already introduced a number of rhetorical terms that were taken over by academic theory. Composition and style are among the key terms borrowed from rhetoric not only by academic doctrine, but by all theories of painting from Alberti's *De pictura* (1435–6) onwards, which was much used in an Italian translation by the Florentine Academy (Barzman, 'The Florentine Accademia del Disegno: liberal education and the Renaissance artist', in Boschloo, 1989, p. 15). 'Compositio' originally referred to a quality of style, namely the careful and coherent ordering of words into sentences, but was used by Alberti to describe the way in which a painter orders the members of the figures depicted into a coherent, lifelike and moving disposition. In Latin both the parts of a sentence and those of a body are called 'membra' (members), but this should not obscure the revolutionary nature of Alberti's use of *compositio*: by so doing he introduced entirely new ways of analysing pictorial representation in terms of disposition, coherence and balance (Baxandall, 1971, p. 130 and Vickers, 1989, pp. 343ff). Style, the other key term taken from rhetoric, is derived from the Latin *stilus*, which means 'pen', but subsequently acquired the metaphorical meanings of expression of thought and a writing manner that is characteristic of one particular author (Cicero *Brutus* §100). The concept of style, however, the insight that a particular idea may be expressed in various ways, all with their specific connotations, goes back to the rhetorical distinction between *res* and *verba*, the subject matter of a speech and its various formulations (Quintilian *Institutio oratoria* II.xv.13–4, III.v.1 and VII.Pr.32–3; Cicero *De oratore* III.xiv–xix). This led in its turn to the doctrine of the three styles: grand or elevated (using many figures of speech and impressive words), intermediate (a more simple way of speaking, less florid) and plain (coming closest to everyday speech). The selection of one of these styles depends on the effect the orator wants to achieve. The grand style is used to stir the emotions, the intermediate to charm and the plain style to

instruct. Academic doctrine took over the concept of style, both in the sense of the manner of working characteristic of an individual artist, and in the sense of a hierarchy of styles that was connected to a hierarchy of aims and genres: the grand style for instance was reserved for religious and historical scenes.

Many theories of painting were based on the models offered by treatises on rhetoric. Leon Battista Alberti's *De pictura* for instance follows the division of the subject matter into elementary skills, art and artist used in Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* (Wright, 1984). Similarly, two much-used genres of theoretical writing on the visual arts owe much to the rhetorical genre of epideictic, which consists of praise or blame of a given subject or person (on epideictic oratory see Vickers, 1989, pp. 53ff). The *paragone*, or comparison between the merits of painting and sculpture or poetry, was a recurring theme in Renaissance art theory. Leonardo's essay in this genre inspired many imitators, and Herder's *Plastik* [On Sculpture] of 1778 is a late echo. The other genre inspired by epideictic oratory was the collection of artists' lives, of which Vasari's *Le Vite de' più eccellenti Pittori, Scultori ed Architetti* (*Lives of the most famous Painters, Sculptors and Architects*) of 1550–68 is the first and most famous instance. In both cases the adaptation of traditional rhetorical genres to new subject matter was fostered by the rhetorical stress on being aware of the relation between *res* and *verba*, subject matter and its formulation. According to Cicero and Quintilian, these are not inseparable or indistinguishable; instead, the subject matter of a speech may be formulated in different ways, dependent on the effect the speaker wants to achieve in a given situation (Rubin, 1995, pp. 54 and 154–6).

Rhetoric had developed a number of techniques to influence the emotions of the audience. On the one hand there was a wide range of subtly differentiated verbal strategies to rouse the emotions, such as vivid description, the use of invective, suggestive metaphors or rhetorical questions. On the other hand the orator could also use a number of other strategies that did not depend exclusively on the use of language. First of all, the speaker had to establish a common ground of shared beliefs between the speaker and the audience. This could be done by speaking the same language as the audience and avoiding strange and unusual words or turns of phrase, but also by creating the feeling that speaker and audience were faced with the same problem and together had to find a way out. This was an act of self-definition of the speaker and the audience which prepares the ground and determines the boundaries of what is going to be enacted. It lent itself very well to an application to other fields than speech, simply because of the metaphor used, which is spatial rather than verbal. Related to this was the use of vivid and lifelike narrative to make the audience see with their mind's eye what the orator was telling them. Of course there was also the use of gesture, expression of the face, and even of dress: if it all became too much, the orator could hide his grief or shame by covering his face in the folds of his toga.

A number of these strategies could be taken over directly in the visual arts, above all the use of gesture and facial expression, and did not involve any

fundamental adaptation. But the central concern in rhetorical theory for visualization, for making the listeners see with their mind's eye what the orator is telling them, is the basis for further-reaching adaptations of other rhetorical strategies to move the audience. This concern for vivid and lifelike narrative is often described in rhetorical texts in terms taken from the visual arts such as 'depiction' or 'sketch' (Van Eck, 1998b, pp. 460–62). The primary aim of this concern was not the truthful or naturalistic representation of reality but to involve and thereby move the audience. But visualization also became a frequent theme in academic texts on the visual arts, where it had a similar function. It is evident in the *Conférences* of the French Académie, where the speaker stood, together with his audience, in front of the painting under discussion and literally made them see by his words what was interesting about it. (For this aspect of rhetoric see also Elsner, 1995, pp. 21–49.) It is also stated very clearly by Reynolds:

> The great end of art is to strike the imagination. . . . A painter of portraits retains the individual likeness; a painter of history shows the man by his actions. A painter . . . has but one sentence to utter, but one moment to exhibit. (Reynolds, *Discourse* IV, pp. 119–20)

Invention, the first stage of the writing process and of the painting process according to academic doctrine, is a process of visualization as well, of planning and imagining what the subject is, what materials should be used, and how the subject should be treated. Finally, the rhetorical imperative that the orator should first of all establish a common ground with the audience could be taken over almost literally in the visual arts: by the use of linear perspective, which creates the illusion of a shared space between spectator and pictorial space, and by the use of dress, attitudes and gestures that were easily recognizable to the contemporary viewer. For example, French academic painting of the seventeenth century gave Greek heroes 'the airs and graces of French courtiers' according to Reynolds, and Caravaggio gave the peasants in his Adoration of the Virgin (Rome, S. Agostino) the same dirty feet as the pilgrims that would see the painting, a procedure that was not immediately appreciated by the Roman Academy. (See Langdon, 1998, pp. 285–9 and Marin, 1995.)

The Nature of Academic Theory

In the period under discussion, artistic theory could take many forms. It often consisted of practical instruction, as in many passages of Leonardo da Vinci's *Trattato della Pittura*, which was used by the French Académie, until the middle of the nineteenth century, in a translation by Roger du Fresne of 1651, illustrated by Nicolas Poussin. It could also offer an analysis and redefinition of painting in terms taken from other disciplines to give it the status of a liberal art, of which Alberti's *De pictura* is an example. Or it could be a normative attempt to

change current practice in the visual arts, as in Federico Borromeo's *De pictura sacra* of 1624, used in the Milanese Accademia Ambrosiana, and intended to reform religious art along the lines set out by the Council of Trent. If one sees academic theory above all as a set of clearly defined normative principles or practical instructions that have received some verbal form, either as a treatise or as the account of a lecture, the range of what counts as theory is narrowed down considerably, and much academic teaching may not be qualified as theory.

This definition of academic theory may however be too limited, and by its concentration on written evidence obscures the possibility that the teaching of the academies could have consisted of practical instruction informed by theory. In this context it is relevant to consider artistic theory in yet another way, and that is by distinguishing theories that are result-oriented from those that are process-oriented. The first group takes as its focus the finished work, and teaches how to judge it; the second takes the process of making a work of art as its subject, and teaches how to make a work of art. The first kind is often found in theoretical texts, such as the *Conférences* of the French Académie. But the second kind is often implicitly present in teaching. For instance, the typically academic organization of drawing instruction by means of graduated copying of old masters reflects rhetorical views on the didactic process, but this theoretical stance is rarely stated explicitly. Similarly, the importance of visualization is often mentioned in rhetorical treatises as a capacity essential for the accomplished orator, but rarely in academic writing as a capacity essential to pictorial invention. Nonetheless it did inform the entire academic teaching process, as well as critical views of finished work. Rhetoric functioned mainly as a process-oriented theory in the academies. It informed teaching practice, the analysis of the process of painting, and the stress on visualization as the basis for invention. These points are not always mentioned explicitly in theoretical texts, but did exert a profound influence on the academic attitude towards art, its nature, and the way it should be taught.

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Chapter 9

The Picturesque and its Development

Andrew Ballantyne

Introduction

It was above all in the 1790s that 'the picturesque' had its day, when it was the topic of heated debate in England and when it was given its clearest definition – or, more exactly, given its clearest definitions, in the plural, because the debate did not resolve into a consensus at the time. By then the term 'picturesque' had been in use for a whole generation, and for the protagonists of 'the picturesque controversy' (as the debate has come to be known) it was a familiar word with established usage; it was only when they sought to make that usage precise that it became clear that they understood the word in different ways.

The picturesque has had wide and prolonged influence in Britain, not all of it good. It became identified with a kind of quaintness, which did not immediately fall into either of the aesthetic categories recognized by mid-eighteenth-century artists – the beautiful and the sublime. The formulation of the category of the picturesque encouraged artists to include subject matter which was neither canonically beautiful, nor emotionally heightened, but which instead had the idiosyncratic charm of the particular. Picturesque subjects might be recognized by their irregular outlines or their broken harmonious colouring, and could include almost any sort of rural landscape and painting of figures who should (to be ideally picturesque) be neither conventionally beautiful, nor heroic. The most characteristic picturesque figure paintings would be scenes of peasant life, with irregular physiognomies in evidence. While the discussion broadened the range of subject matter which it seemed fitting for the artists of the Royal Academy to paint, and therefore for a time seemed avant-garde, it can be seen that the type of subject matter which was found to have the requisite formal properties could easily become sentimental and nostalgic. Artists now are scornful of the picturesque as a category partly because quaintness and nostalgia are seen to be an inescapable part of the idea, and are no longer admirable. There is also the problem that if one is to paint picturesquely, then surely there is an

implication in the very term 'picturesque' that there will be a production of images which are reminiscent of pictures already painted. This troubles serious artists, keen to make their own distinctive marks, but it has rarely if ever been a problem for amateur painters, who by contrast try to make their own images look like those which have established merit. The afterlife of the picturesque has been prolific but of low status: in the watercolour views of the Sunday painter, or even in photographs of conventionally beautiful scenery. Some of the practices of the picturesque are now so completely ingrained in the way we see the world, that we take them for granted and revert to them by default when our attention lapses – when taking a snapshot, or choosing a route for a walk.

Pictorial Composition

The most formulaic, systematic and clearly understood version of the picturesque is that which involves the observer trying to make the scene before the eyes correspond with a painter's idea of what the scene should be. The observer of a scene will have in mind a formula for a conventional landscape painting, based on a reductive view of Old Master landscapes (typically for example by Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin or Salvator Rosa), and will value the natural scene before them more highly if it conforms to this mental template for a painting. In the 1760s this would have meant that in an ideally picturesque landscape the traveller would have found dark masses of trees in the foreground, which would, in all probability, establish the edges of the scene and bound the composition. They would frame the brilliantly lit middle distance, in which a curving line – which might be made by a path, a river or a highway – would lead the eye into the background. There would be no elements to jar by being too harshly coloured or inappropriate in other ways. When one found such a scene then one admired it, perhaps using a 'Claude glass' in order to make it look still more like a painting. To make such an apparatus a convex glass would be mounted on a dark background: it would reflect and miniaturize the scene, and subdue its colours, but tantalizingly it did not allow the image to be taken away. 'I saw in my glass a picture', said the poet Thomas Gray, 'that if I could transmitt to you & fix it in all the softness of its living colours, would fairly sell for a thousand pounds' (letter to Thomas Wharton, November 1769; in Andrews 1994, vol. 7, p. 232). Of course a modern picturesque traveller would photograph it, but in the eighteenth century the only way to fix the image was in a sketch, and sketching was an admired polite accomplishment. The picturesque traveller went out into the countryside in search of such pictures, and it was known that they could be found in such celebrated places as the Wye valley and the Lake District, which began to develop as places for tourism. The most famous of the tourists was the Reverend William Gilpin, who made 'picturesque tours' to various parts of the kingdom mostly during the 1770s and published his accounts of them mainly during the 1780s. It was Gilpin who was responsible for associating the

picturesque with a particular range of characteristics – for establishing its style – and for reflecting on what it was that made certain scenes so much more suitable than others for treatment by painters. His first tour, which took him along the River Wye in 1770, was eventually published in 1782, after encouragement from Thomas Gray. It was a great success and introduced the idea of picturesque tourism to a much wider audience than had previously understood the activity. He opened the work by explaining that the book proposes a new reason for travelling – that of examining the face of a country 'by the rules of picturesque beauty . . . adapting the description of natural scenery to the principles of artificial landscape; and of opening the sources of those pleasures, which are derived from the comparison'. There will be more to say about those pleasures, but the game to be played is clear enough: one looks at natural scenery using the critical apparatus with which one would normally look at paintings or gardens (the term 'artificial landscape' could be understood to cover both) and as a result the journey becomes more pleasurable. The pleasures of being in the open air, and of taking healthy exercise would be there whatever the scenery, but by Gilpin's means a source of additional pleasure was opened up. Gilpin explained that the scenery of a journey on a river with high banks was particularly well adapted to this activity because it fell into the system of conventions of landscape paintings.

> Every view on a river, thus circumstanced, is composed of four grand parts; the *area*, which is the river itself; the two *side-screens*, which are the opposite banks, and mark the perspective; and the *front-screen*, which points out the winding of the river.
>
> If the Wye ran, like a Dutch canal, between parallel banks, there could be no front-screen: the two side-screens, in that situation would lengthen to a point. (Andrews, 1994, vol. 7, p. 245)

Although natural scenery was the basis of Gilpin's enjoyment, what we find here is not exactly nature worship, because in this example he is happy to accept buildings in the scene, along with the activities of industry – still then a relative novelty – which are seen as completely harmonious, lending some variety to the scene and even softening it. The iron forges ran on charcoal, which was made on the spot by cutting down trees, including some of those growing on the river banks, so that 'a kind of alternacy takes place: what is, this year, a thicket; may, the next, be an open grove'. The charcoal burning produced 'smoke, which is frequently seen issuing from the sides of the hills; and, spreading its thin veil over a part of them, beautifully breaks their lines, and unites them with the sky'. When it was intensified in the industrial cities this smoke would become a threat to health and well-being, but here in the countryside which was the crucible of the industrial revolution Gilpin had no way of reading it as a portent of things to come. It dispersed in a delicate veil, reminiscent of the effects of a morning's mist captured on canvas by Claude.

As everything in Gilpin's account is referred back to visual impressions – particularly the visual impressions cultivated in painting – the river and its surroundings become scenery, become landscape. In an alternative description we would be looking at fertile farmland, at the exciting new industrial production of wealth, and at an important means of communication for the carrying of heavy loads, which the river certainly was. But in Gilpin's account the Wye becomes a work of art, or rather an ever-changing sequence of works of art. That is how he saw it in his descriptions, and that is how it was consumed by the multitudes of tourists who came in Gilpin's wake. The only significant difference between the Wye and a series of paintings is that, as Thomas Gray noticed, it could not be transmitted, nor fixed, nor sold.

Associations of Ideas

In eighteenth-century aesthetic theory the role of the association of ideas was seen as important in the appreciation of any art, whether it be painting or literature. We find the association ideas in John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* (1690), and in Joseph Addison's influential essays in the *Spectator* (1711–14). In Hume's philosophy the association of ideas is central to the discussion, and it formed the whole of the theory known as 'associationism' which was promoted in Edinburgh in Hume's wake by Archibald Alison and Francis Jeffery. 'Picturesque' had originally meant *after the manner of painters*, and an associationist would see as picturesque that which calls the work of painters to mind. What is to be gained by making such associations in the mind? It might be thought that a beautiful view would be beautiful whether or not it brought to mind the work of painters, and indeed it might arguably have been so, even in the eighteenth century, but in such a case the beauty of the scene would not have been picturesque. A picturesque scene in nature, because it brought to mind the work of great masters, could be seen to belong in the category of high culture, even if the elements of which it was composed were in themselves commonplace. In the 1790s we find Richard Payne Knight condemning the practices of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown on the grounds that Brown 'knew nothing of pictures', it being by then a widely (but not universally) accepted fact that a knowledge of painting, and indeed an imagination well stocked by a liberal education, was necessary to the appreciation of landscapes, and therefore to the design of landscapes. Indeed the term 'landscape' when applied to practical gardening shows in itself that the scene was viewed with reference to paintings. The origin of the practice goes back to the beginning of the eighteenth century, when Vanbrugh can be found recommending the preservation of the old manor at Woodstock (where Vanbrugh was working on Blenheim Palace) saying that it 'wou'd make One of the Most Agreable Objects that the best of Landskip Painters can invent'. He also pointed to the 'lively and pleasing Reflections' prompted by the building, so that '*tho*' *they may not find Art enough in the* Builder*, to make them admire*

the Beauty of the Fabrick they will find Wonder enough in the Story, to make 'em pleas'd with the Sight of it'. So Vanbrugh was an intuitive associationist, at least in this argument, and although he did not use the term 'picturesque', he associated the view with a landscape, and ushered in the practice which would later be called 'picturesque'. Similarly Joseph Addison did not use the term, but coined the expression 'pleasures of the imagination' to designate the practice of associating memories of images with the scene before one's eyes. He argued (1712) that works of nature were to be preferred to works of art, but that 'we find the works of Nature still more pleasant, the more they resemble those of Art', explaining that in such scenes the pleasure arises from two principles:

> from the agreeableness of the Objects to the Eye, and from their Similtude to other Objects: We are pleased as well with comparing their Beauties as with surveying them, and can represent them to our Minds, either as Copies or Originals. Hence it is that we take Delight in a Prospect which is well laid out, and diversified with Fields and Meadows; Woods and Rivers; in those accidental Landskips of Trees, Clouds and Cities, that are sometimes found in the Veins of Marble; in the curious Fret-work of rocks, and Grottoes; and, in a Word, in any thing that hath such a Variety or Regularity as may seem the Effect of Design, in what we call the Works of Chance. (Hunt and Willis, 1975, p. 141)

So nature is admired, but admired most when it resembles art. Therefore, to fall in with Addison's sensibility, in order properly to appreciate nature one must have a knowledge of art and be able to call it to mind. Hence it follows that as the term 'picturesque' came to be used, it would mean that a natural scene evoked the work of painters, and when it was used it would be a term of approbation; but what would be the characteristics of such a scene?

It does not follow that a natural scene should have any particular set of properties which would make it picturesque, only that a painter had in a masterly and authoritative way evoked the qualities which could be perceived in the natural scenery. Therefore the properties of a picturesque natural scene would necessarily be those of the landscape paintings admired at the time, and the type of scene most readily to be recognized as picturesque would be one which conformed most directly to the teachable rules of pictorial composition, as we have seen with Gilpin above – and he also saw irregularity of outline as being helpful to achieving a picturesque effect. The Italian and French landscape painters who were most routinely admired had their own characteristic landscape types, which might be recognized in natural scenery – such as the gentle Arcadian idylls of Claude, or the tumultuous crags of Salvator Rosa. The range of painters could be extended, so that more types of scenery could be considered as picturesque, and to this end we find Richard Payne Knight praising the work of Dutch and Flemish landscapists, but Knight's more original departure in developing the idea of the picturesque was to draw attention to the picturesque effect of conditions of atmosphere and light. He associated pearly mists with the work of Claude, as also the golden light of the setting (or rising) sun. In conditions such

as these the tonal range of the colours in a scene is within a more limited range than it would be in full sunlight with sharp shadows, just as the range of tonality which can be achieved in a painting is much more limited than in a natural scene. (The strongest contrast which pigment can manage is when black and white are juxtaposed, but that is as nothing when we consider the range between dazzling sunlight and deep shade, where the eye must make its reflexive adjustments if it is to pick up the detail.) Therefore it is in the scenes where the tonal range is limited that the effect is more harmonious and painterly, and Knight particularly recommended taking walks in the first two hours after sunrise, or in the last two hours before dusk, times of day when the relatively weak light leads us to see everything in a muted tonality, idealized and poeticized.

Such scenes evoked not only the work of painters, but also the work of poets, and the picturesque landscape is usually also a highly literary one. Virgil in particular was called to mind: the landscape at Stourhead was inflected so as to call to mind episodes from the *Aeneid* (Virgil's account of the wanderings of Aeneas, from Troy to Rome) but for *afficionadi* of landscape his other poems had a more widespread influence. His *Georgics* treated lyrically the activities of agricultural life, and his *Eclogues* were set in a golden age when indolent shepherds sang carefully wrought love songs to one another. The romance of such an idyllic rural life was an important part of the cliché system of eighteenth-century culture: images of cottages and peasant life proliferated in the name of the picturesque, showing simple folk in harmony with nature, leading innocent and virtuous lives, a theme which is also represented in poems such as Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* (1770), and Gray's *Elegy* (1750). Self-consciously picturesque cottages were built, the most elaborate examples being at Blaise Hamlet, designed by John Nash, and there was a spate of pattern books encouraging others to do the same or similar things.

The picturesque when considered in the way outlined here was a practice rather than a category of objects. The practice involved making a comparison with the works of painters, and it was therefore strictly speaking a practice restricted to visual concerns, in precisely the way that Addison defined his 'pleasures of the imagination'. However, it is a small step to take to allow other, non-visual, elements of the imagination to come into play in the association of ideas, and although such associations are not actually picturesque, they were nonetheless very evidently in play at the same time, so that we can see Claude's landscapes evoking the work of Virgil, and the landscape at Stourhead evoking not only Claude's landscapes, but also very deliberately evoking Virgil. Turner often exhibited his paintings along with fragments of poetry, so that pictorial and literary allusiveness could work together, and in eighteenth-century polite culture generally it was assumed that the imagination of the observer or reader would be well stocked with knowledge of art and literature so that allusions particularly to classical literature and old master paintings would be recognized intuitively and immediately as part of the spontaneous response to a scene. From this

theory of the picturesque it followed that it would be necessary for designers of landscapes to have a good knowledge of art and literature, in addition to the technical skills needed for managing plants and water.

Hogarth, Burke and Price

Uvedale Price proposed a quite different description of the picturesque. His theory also derived from reading Gilpin and the other proponents of the general idea, but he sought to link it to the theory of beauty which had been advanced by the painter William Hogarth in *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753). Hogarth proposed that the basis of beauty was the smoothly curving serpentine line, which was to be found, he argued, in all beautiful things. His arguments persuaded Edmund Burke, now more often remembered as a politician, who added a second aesthetic category, the sublime, in his early *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Burke's essay was widely read and had great influence, notably on Kant, whose *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) acted as preparation for the fuller development of his aesthetic theory in *The Critique of Judgement* (1790) in which the beautiful and the sublime play leading roles. Burke's essay proposed two distinct categories of aesthetic experience: one attractive, small-scale and beguiling, the other awesome, grand and magnificent, stirring the soul and making the flesh horripilate. The general idea of the sublime was taken from the antique author Longinus, but Burke's particular analysis was strikingly original, except in the parts about beauty, where he drew all too evidently from Hogarth.

What Uvedale Price proposed was that there was a third aesthetic category, the picturesque, which he saw as being as distinct from the beautiful and the sublime as they were from one another. Therefore whereas other authors could refer to 'picturesque beauty' when they meant the type of beauty which called to mind the work of painters, Price found this usage confused. Beauty was one thing, and picturesqueness was another. Moreover, like Hogarth and Burke, he believed that the aesthetic quality of an object was inherent in the object – that it was not, as Hume and the associationists had it, in the mind of the beholder. It followed that although the discovery had been made by way of pictures, nevertheless something real and tangible had been discovered, and its characteristic property was that it was neither smooth, like beauty, nor rough, like the sublime, but irregular, as Gilpin had shown the picturesque to be. And just as Burke had applied the categories of the beautiful and sublime to things other than paintings, so Price imagined that it made sense to speak, for example, of picturesque music (he gave Scarlatti's sonatas by way of example). Whatever the medium involved, beautiful things were soothing to the senses, whereas sublime things treated them harshly, and picturesque things, it seems, tickled the senses. He did not mean to say that Scarlatti's music brought to mind the work of particular painters. It should have followed that the landscape gardener's education could

have been limited to developing a real sensitivity to the aesthetic qualities of his designs, in legitimate ignorance of the rest of polite culture.

The Picturesque

The picturesque is now seen as belonging to the province of the amateur, but the practice of associating ideas with works of art was pioneered in the theory of the picturesque, and that is firmly entrenched in the practice of contemporary artists. The theory of the picturesque includes opposed views of what makes it work, and the tension between the two theoretical strands is heightened by the fact that the more adept philosopher, Knight, had more overtly contentious views which made him a less than ideal advocate for his cause. Price's theory was wrong, but he gave more concrete and useful examples for landscape designers, and it is therefore his name which is more often associated with the idea. Indeed an edition of Price's writings was brought out after his death with a commentary which turned them into a work of associationist aesthetics, conforming to Knight's theoretical ideas. The picturesque remained a concern of British philosophers, caught in a backwater when Kant took up and developed Burke's aesthetic categories of the sublime and the beautiful. Kant's work has had such prestige that this theoretically less-sophisticated offshoot from Hume on one hand and Burke on the other has been lost in the shade, but its practical effect on the way we look at landscape has been and continues to be so vast as to go unnoticed much of the time. In Britain it sometimes seems that we have learnt the lessons of the picturesque so thoroughly, that we mistake its practices for behaviour governed by unmediated instinct.

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PART TWO

Around Modernism

Chapter 10

The Aesthetics of Kant and Hegel

Jason Gaiger

The theories of art put forward by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) have long been seen to represent two rival positions which nonetheless arise from a distinctive tradition of German philosophy. In both cases, a concern with problems of art and beauty represents only one part of their respective philosophical systems. It is this larger theoretical framework which lends both theories their characteristic breadth and range of interest. Whilst Kant's name has principally been associated with the development of a formalist aesthetics, Hegel is seen to represent an alternative, content-based approach which takes into account the social and historical context in which works of art are made and appreciated. Both thinkers have been enormously influential on the subsequent development of aesthetics and the impact of their ideas has been felt far beyond the confines of academic philosophy.

Immanuel Kant

The publication in 1790 of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* as the third of his three great *Critiques* appeared to confer upon aesthetics a status comparable to that which had traditionally been enjoyed by epistemology and moral philosophy.[1] In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1770) Kant had addressed the question of what we can know, setting limits to metaphysical speculation whilst at the same time providing an account of the active contribution of the human mind to our knowledge of the world. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) he had considered the problem of right action, establishing a universalist ethics on the basis of respect for the moral law and a theory of the autonomy of the will. In the first part of the *Critique of Judgement*, the 'critique of aesthetic judgement', Kant embarks on a parallel undertaking, to establish the distinctive status of judgements of taste. Kant's third *Critique* can thus be seen to complement his earlier investigations into truth and morality by opening up the domain of beauty to critical examination.

The situation is more complex, however, than this schematic overview would suggest. Kant's primary concern is with the character of our faculty of judgement as such and his treatment of this problem extends far beyond the traditional subjects of aesthetics. The reflections on beauty, sublimity and the Fine Arts which make up the first part of the *Critique of Judgement* are embedded in a larger and more ambitious theory of 'reflective' judgement which extends to cover teleological judgements as well as aesthetic judgement.[2] Indeed, Kant suggests that a proper understanding of the faculty of judgement can in some way unify the different parts of his philosophical system, providing an important bridge between his theories of 'truth' and 'goodness'. It is this larger context which accounts for the considerable difficulties encountered by anyone approaching Kant's text for the first time. The *Critique of Judgement* is a forbiddingly technical work and its correct interpretation remains the subject of ongoing controversy even amongst Kant scholars.

Kant begins the 'critique of aesthetic judgement' by distinguishing what he terms a judgement of taste – paradigmatically the judgement that something is beautiful – from a mere expression of liking. He points out that when we make a judgement of taste we do not simply declare our subjective preference for something. Rather, we raise a claim which we hold to be valid for other people as well. In the case of a mere liking for something we remain unperturbed if other people's preferences differ from our own. I happen to like dry wines, whilst you prefer sweet. But when we claim that something is beautiful it *does* matter to us if our judgements do not coincide. For here we speak of beauty *as if* it were a property of the object. Although aesthetic appreciation is based on our own subjective feelings, we regard these feelings as possessing a peculiar form of necessity. For in making a judgement of taste we implicitly demand of other people that they too respond in the same way. Kant maintains that it makes no sense to insist that 'this painting is beautiful *to me*'. In declaring that something is beautiful, I go beyond my own subjective likes and dislikes and express something which I hold to be valid for everyone else as well. In making a judgement of taste, I speak in a 'universal voice' and extend my own judgement to all other judging subjects. This claim to 'universality' is not grounded directly in the object itself, but in an assumed consensus between all those who are able to pass judgement. A judgement of taste, then, raises a claim to *intersubjective* validity.

It may at first appear as if judgements of taste possess the same status as a judgement of fact or a moral judgement. However, a judgement of taste remains significantly different from both these types of judgement insofar as its primary source of justification is to be found in the individual subject's feeling of pleasure (or displeasure) before the object. We cannot be persuaded by reason or argument to accept something as beautiful if we do not ourselves *experience* it as beautiful. The judgement that something is beautiful is a logically singular judgement which must be made in the presence (or personal recollection) of the object itself. From our appreciation of a particular flower as beautiful we cannot conclude that *all* flowers of that type are beautiful. A judgement of taste is, after all,

an *aesthetic* judgement, dependent upon sensory experience rather than conceptual or rational knowledge.

The problem which Kant sets out to resolve, then, is how it is that a judgement of taste, which is based on the individual's subjective feeling of pleasure or displeasure in response to an object, can raise a claim to universality. His explanation for this phenomenon is to be found in a complex account of a state of harmony or 'free play' in our mental faculties to which the experience of beauty is said to give rise. Kant locates the ultimate ground of our pleasure in the beautiful not in any merely physiological response to the stimulus provided by the object, but in a dynamic attunement between the faculties of imagination and understanding. Kant's account of these faculties and the relationship between them draws upon the theory of the mind which he had developed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In normal cognition, the role of the imagination is to synthesize the manifold of data which is given in intuition, whilst the role of the understanding is to subsume this data under some definite concept. In the case of a judgement of taste, however, the faculties are brought into a state of attunement which permits a form of cognitive engagement with the object without yet subsuming it under a determinate concept. In an important sense, our response to the object remains open and exploratory.

Kant's 'deduction' or justification of the claim to universal validity which is raised with a judgement of taste is based upon showing that a judgement of taste employs the same mental resources as a normal cognitive judgement, even though it employs these resources in a significantly different way. He argues that since the resources common to both forms of judgement represent an indispensable requirement of all knowledge whatsoever, we are entitled to assume that anyone who is capable of knowledge must also possess the resources which are required to make a judgement of taste. Since this is an expectation which every normal human being can be taken to satisfy, Kant takes himself to have shown that we are entitled to demand of others that they too experience the pleasure in the object that arises from the harmony or free play of the faculties.

What Kant has not succeeded in showing, however, is that the same relation between these two faculties necessarily occurs in all persons under the same circumstances. Mere possession of the subjective conditions for knowledge in general may not yet be sufficient for enjoying aesthetic experience of the sort Kant describes. It may well be the case that the experience of beauty varies across different persons or that it requires a special aptitude or responsiveness to particular kinds of objects. For this reason, doubts have been raised about the success of Kant's 'deduction' of the universal validity of judgements of taste. Nonetheless, his explanation of aesthetic pleasure in terms of the achievement of a state of harmony or free play of the faculties has proved richly suggestive. For Kant, our pleasure in the beautiful is not a merely sensory phenomenon but involves a free and open-ended engagement of the fundamental resources of the human mind. This picture of an enlivened and dynamic responsiveness which is intrinsically pleasurable, and which is apprehended as coherent or meaningful in a way

quite distinct from conceptual knowledge, appears to capture something true of aesthetic experience and remains an important model for thinking about our interest in both objects of natural beauty and works of art.[3]

Importantly, however, Kant goes beyond this explanatory account of our pleasure in the beautiful by offering what we might term 'identificatory criteria' for what may *count as* a judgement of taste. Kant maintains that we are entitled to raise a claim to universality in respect of a judgement of taste only when we are confident that our pleasure in the object in *solely* due to the harmony of the faculties. There are, of course, many other grounds for pleasure in an object and Kant's demonstration of the intersubjective validity of judgements of taste involves highly exacting constraints on what may be considered an example of a judgement of this sort. It is in establishing these conditions that Kant puts forward what have proved to be some of his most contentious, but also some of his most influential, views. For it is this part of his argument, above all, which has been taken up by later thinkers and which has led to his reputation as one of the founding fathers of a narrowly *formalist* approach to aesthetics. Questions remain, however, as to whether Kant's formalism necessarily follows from his fundamental explanation of aesthetic pleasure and, indeed, whether the imposition of formalist constraints is compatible with the richer and more nuanced account of aesthetic experience which he elaborates elsewhere in the text.

Kant offers two identificatory criteria for what may count as a judgement of taste. The first requires that our judgement be 'disinterested'. This is the more straightforward of the two. Kant insists that when judging the beauty of an object we must abstract from all moral and appetitive interests and attend solely to the object's appearance, for the intervention of such exterior interests would ruin the impartiality of the judgement of taste. The second criterion requires that we attend only to the form of 'purposiveness' in the object or what Kant terms 'finality of form'. This is more difficult to understand and is linked to Kant's discussion of teleological judgement in the second half of the book. Kant maintains that a beautiful object must have the form of 'purposiveness' without yet having a purpose, that is to say, it must have an appearance of order and rationality which, nonetheless, does not point to any *specific* end or purpose. Kant seems to think that determinate knowledge of what an object is for would interfere with our capacity to respond to it aesthetically. Our awareness that a building is intended to serve as a church or as a barracks, for example, would inhibit our ability to judge freely of its beauty. Instead, he presents as paradigmatic instances of pure judgements of taste things such as interweaving foliage, crystals and even crustaceans, which please in regard to their form alone. When considering an object's beauty we should be concerned only with the formal properties of the object without presupposing any concept of what it is meant to be.

Although Kant's remarks are principally directed at objects of natural beauty rather than works of art, they have been taken to establish the lineaments of a strictly formalist approach to aesthetics. On this view, a properly aesthetic response to an artwork requires first, that we attend solely to its outward pre-

sentation or appearance in abstraction from any moral, social or political content which it might be seen to express and, second, that we direct our attention exclusively to its formal rather than to its representational features. Whilst Kant's work is viewed as an important philosophical source for such views, formalist aesthetics has seemed particularly appropriate to account for modernist works of art produced long after Kant's death. Indeed, it is no coincidence that one of the most vigorous defences of formalism should have been put forward in the early years of the twentieth century by two of the organizers of a groundbreaking exhibition of 'postimpressionist' art: Roger Fry (1920) and Clive Bell (1914). Both writers claimed that the supposed 'distortions' to be found in the work of contemporary artists such as Cézanne and Gauguin could be explained in terms of the priority given to the formal properties of the work over and above the requirements of illusionistic depiction. Bell, in particular, sought to deny the importance of the narrative or representational features of artworks, maintaining that the sole criterion of artistic quality is to be found in what he terms 'significant form'. On Bell's view, significant form can be located in phenomena as diverse as the windows of Chartres cathedral, a Persian bowl, and the paintings of Nicolas Poussin. Wherever it is found, it gives rise to a specific 'aesthetic emotion' and it is this which explains the high value we attribute to certain works of art.

Bell, then, offers us a strong version of aesthetic realism. Significant form is a property which inheres in the object itself and it is the presence of this property which justifies the claim that an object is beautiful or aesthetically moving. The link between significant form and aesthetic response is *causal*; it is the object's formal properties, and the relations between these properties, which arouse in the viewer the appropriate aesthetic emotion. These properties exist independently of the person who perceives them and provide adequate justification for our aesthetic judgements. By contrast, Kant maintains that a judgement of taste possesses only 'subjective universal necessity'. The task of the 'critique of aesthetic judgement' is to demonstrate the validity of the *claim* to intersubjective validity which is raised with a judgement of taste, not to establish an objective statement of fact. The ultimate ground of judgements of taste is located not in any purportedly objective property of the object itself but in the faculties of cognition shared by all judging subjects.

Bell's theory of 'significant form' is essentially ahistorical, giving rise to the same 'aesthetic emotion' across different cultures and different historical periods. Whilst different societies have been more or less sensitive to the dimension of form, resulting in a series of peaks and troughs in the history of art, the true source of aesthetic value remains constant. However, Bell's writings also betray a subtle shift of emphasis between two complementary theses. It is but a short step from claiming that *all* artworks are to be valued primarily for their formal properties to the claim that the *best* or most valuable works of art are those which exhibit their formal properties most perspicuously. It is this second thesis which provided the basis for formalism as an evaluative or ideological category

which could be employed in support of modernist art. In claiming that aesthetic value did not reside in features such as representational content, verisimilitude, psychological depth, or even technical virtuosity, the work of Bell and Fry also provided theoretical justification for the stylistic and technical innovations of modernist painting and sculpture.

This idea that modernist art can be characterized in terms of a greater or more exclusive concern with art's distinctively formal properties was subsequently taken up and radicalized by the American art critic, Clement Greenberg (1986–93). What is distinctive to Greenberg's theory of modernism, however, is that this now becomes an explicitly *historical* thesis. The development of modernist painting is presented as an ongoing process of 'purification' through which features extrinsic to the formal concerns of painting are gradually excluded or eliminated. These include the pictorial conventions inherited from older traditions of academic or representational painting as well as properties taken over or borrowed from other artistic media. In order to achieve 'purity', painting must not only exclude all narrative, or merely anecdotal, concerns, which properly belong to the medium of literature, but also the direct evocation of three-dimensional space and of entities in the round, which is the concern of sculpture. The inherent tendency of modernist painting is towards 'flatness', encompassing a frank recognition of the shape of the support and the properties of the pigment. Although formal properties inhere in all successful painting, Greenberg maintains that it is only with the development of modernism, and with the emergence of abstract art in particular, that these properties are freed from all inessential encumbrances and made the exclusive focus of attention.

Whilst Kant's aesthetics is often seen as an important source for formalist theories of art, there are a number of features of his account which cannot easily be accommodated by such views. Indeed, the sections of the *Critique of Judgement* specifically dedicated to the Fine Arts present a theory of art which is notably at odds with such an approach. Careful attention to Kant's account of 'genius' and to his theory of 'aesthetic ideas' provides an important corrective to one-sided interpretations of his views. He begins his discussion by addressing what appears to be a considerable difficulty for his position. As the product of intentional human activity, artworks are necessarily created with a specific end or purpose in mind. Artworks, it would seem, cannot display that 'purposiveness without a purpose' which his theory of taste requires. Kant answers this difficulty by introducing into his account the notion of genius. He maintains that a work of Fine Art, as opposed to what is merely useful or agreeable, cannot be produced mechanically by following a set of pre-given rules. It must, rather, be the product of genius, an innate capacity to create new rules rather than following extant ones. Just as the judgement that something is beautiful cannot have its determining basis in the application of a pre-given concept, so the production of Fine Art through genius cannot be based on pre-existing precepts or rules.

Kant characterizes the animating principle of genius as the ability to exhibit what he terms 'aesthetic ideas'. An aesthetic idea is something which both con-

tains and promotes a rich train of associations but which cannot be captured by any determinate thought or concept. Here Kant is explicitly concerned with the *content* of artworks. In terms similar to those in which he describes the pleasurable response at the basis of judgements of beauty, he maintains that aesthetic ideas quicken or enliven the mind by opening up a wide realm of connected images. Our mental powers are set in a 'purposive momentum' which is self-sustaining and open-ended. Here the free play of the imagination is linked to concepts or rational ideas but its activity remains similarly unconstrained by the requirement of cognition. It seems, then, that Kant does not wish to exclude content from either the creation or the appreciation of artworks. In both cases his primary concern is to elucidate the delicate balance between the mind's demand for order and the freedom of the imagination which, conjointly, form the underlying ground of our pleasure in the beautiful. Indeed, Kant goes on to claim that the freedom from external constraint which characterizes this relation between imagination and understanding can serve as a symbol of the freedom of the will from external determination and thus as a symbol of *moral* freedom. Kant identifies four points of comparison between the beautiful and the morally good: (a) our liking for both is *immediate*; (b) both please without any prior *interest* or desire in their object; (c) both raise a claim to *universal validity*; and (d) both involve the exercise of *freedom*, for the exercise of moral choice requires freedom of the will and the apprehension of beauty freedom of the imagination.

Kant initially sets out to establish the independent significance and validity of judgements of taste in distinction from both cognitive and moral judgements. As his account unfolds, however, it becomes clear that the task of differentiating the good, the true, and the beautiful is but a necessary first step in the more ambitious task of working out the complex relations that pertain between these different domains of human knowledge and experience. Earlier approaches to Kant's aesthetics were typified by the attempt to extract an analytically defensible theory of art and beauty which could be given independent justification. More recent studies, however, have tended to recognize that the enduring significance of Kant's ideas crucially depends upon understanding the wider context in which they were originally articulated. Approached in this manner, Kant's aesthetics can be seen to offer not only an important way of understanding the distinctive characteristics of our pleasure in the beautiful but a framework for understanding the deeper significance of art and beauty in relation to other domains of human experience.

G. W. F. Hegel

As with Kant, a sustained engagement with aesthetics belongs to the later period of Hegel's thought, and his reflections on the subject presuppose and develop out of his mature philosophical system. Unlike Kant, however, important discussions of particular artworks and of the philosophical significance of art are

to be found in other of his writings, including the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1817). Hegel first lectured on aesthetics in 1818, carrying out four more series of lectures before his death in Berlin in 1831. These were compounded into a single text and published after his death on the basis of Hegel's own manuscripts and of transcripts made by his students. Recent scholarship has emphasized the inevitable inaccuracy and selectivity of the published text and has sought to identify significant changes in Hegel's thought across the different lecture series. The place of art in Hegel's system was already established in the *Encyclopaedia*, however, and his mature thought on the subject must be seen to represent an extension and elaboration of his established views.

Whereas the starting point for Kant's aesthetics had been the status or validity of the individual subject's response to objects of beauty, Hegel turns his attention to the meaning and content of artworks themselves. The lectures are characterized by an extraordinarily broad knowledge of the art and customs of different ages and peoples, combining a systematic treatment of the different types or forms of art with an historical account of the development of art through different stages or periods. Hegel begins by addressing the question as to whether the Fine Arts are, in fact, amenable to philosophical treatment. Should art not be considered a mere luxury or diversion, unconnected to practical human concerns? And is it not, in any case, too diverse and unregulated to be captured by philosophical analysis? Hegel responds to these objections by observing that art is one way in which the 'deepest interests of humanity' and the 'most comprehensive truths of the mind' are revealed to consciousness. For Hegel, art takes its place alongside religion and philosophy as a form of self-understanding through which human beings arrive at knowledge about themselves and the world they inhabit.

Hegel suggests that one of the ways in which such knowledge is acquired is through a process of 'externalization'. In working upon and changing external things we come to recognize *ourselves* in the changes we have brought about. Works of art can thus be seen as the result of a highly developed ability to articulate and make explicit the life of the mind. Hegel is primarily concerned with art as a product of human self-consciousness, that is, as a form of free, purposive activity. By contrast, the products of nature belong to the realm of necessity and uniformity. For this reason, he excludes from his aesthetics consideration of natural beauty, even though this had formed one of the principal goals of Kant's enquiry. Artistic beauty stands 'higher' than natural beauty since it expresses a recognizable content which can be given philosophical consideration. On Hegel's view, the changing character of art is closely linked to the religious views of different peoples, articulating different forms of human self-understanding as well as different conceptions of the divine or ultimate ground of human existence. Indeed, Hegel claims that art differs from religion and philosophy only in the *mode* in which these deepest insights are expressed. Whereas philosophy operates on the level of thought or the concept, and religion on that of imagination or

representation, Hegel identifies the sensuous or material character of art as its distinguishing feature. The realm of art is defined as the 'sensuous appearance' (*sinnliche Erscheinung*) of the idea.

Works of art thus sustain a productive tension between the content or ideas which they express and the particular form or shape through which this content is given. On Hegel's view, both content and form can be inadequate and both can be inadequate in relation to each other. It is on the basis of this shifting relation that he develops his account of the different forms of art and of the historical changes which these have undergone. The first and most primitive stage he terms the *symbolic*. Here he is primarily concerned with the art of early Eastern civilisations and of ancient Egypt. The principal characteristic of symbolic art is the incongruity between the idea and the form in which it is expressed. At this stage, Hegel claims, the divine is conceived only as something abstract, as an absolute power which is 'beyond' the world of experience. Thus, for example, whilst the great pyramids enclose an inner meaning, this meaning is completely enveloped and concealed by their external shape. The forms in which the divine is represented either remain arbitrary or are wildly distorted, as in the figures of the gods in Indian art with their multiple limbs and combination of different animal parts. The second, *classical* stage is that of ancient Greece. Here the struggle for expression and the endless search for an adequate means of representation give way to the ideal calm and serenity of Greek art and of Greek sculpture in particular. The divine is now conceived in terms of the concrete individuality and character of the different gods and is expressed for the first time in human form. The inner life of spirit is made visible on the animate surface of the human body in which it finds its proper vehicle of expression. For Hegel, the classical type of art represents the 'highest excellence' which art can reach, achieving a perfect, if short-lived, unity of form and content.

The third and final stage Hegel terms the *romantic*. In contrast to our current use of the word, Hegel employs this term to describe all art since Greek antiquity, linking it closely to the emergence of Christianity. The key to Hegel's discussion is his claim that the new conception of the divine articulated in the Christian faith can no longer find adequate expression in sensuous form. In the case of Greek art, religious awareness and artistic expression remained wholly unified. In contrast, the content of the Christian faith is articulated doctrinally and this doctrine possesses a prior and independent existence from any attempt to represent it artistically. Moreover, Hegel maintains that with the spread of Christianity there arose a new form of subjective inwardness and self-reflection whose proper medium of expression can no longer be found in the sensible shape of art but only in the realm of thought. The unity achieved by Greek art is forever lost and there arises in its place a new and irreconcilable division of form and content. Art of the romantic period continually points beyond itself, indicating but unable to represent a content which it can never fully articulate.

Hegel goes on to suggest that the time in which art could represent our highest needs and interests is now definitively past and that in this function too art has

been superseded by religion and philosophy. Hegel's much-misunderstood thesis of the 'end of art' has two different domains of application. The first relates, as we have seen, to the transition from the classical to the romantic period. It is only in the classical period that art attains a perfect correspondence of form and content; the postclassical or romantic era is marked by new forms of knowledge which can no longer adequately be articulated in sensuous form. The second domain of application, however, is Hegel's own age. Hegel maintains that the highly reflective culture of contemporary life, which has learnt to regulate its practices in terms of formalized rules and codes of behaviour, can no longer enjoy the same immediate response to works of art as that of an earlier age. The 'knee does not bend' and we no longer venerate works of art as expressions of divine revelation. Instead, art is something we want to *understand* and which we necessarily seek to comprehend by means of thought as well as feeling.

Hegel's lectures on aesthetics are marked by a profound ambivalence concerning the status and function of art in relation to philosophy. On the one hand, Hegel distinguishes art from mere diversion or entertainment, recognizing it as one mode in which our deepest insights into ourselves and our relation to the world are articulated. On the other hand, art is identified as but a prior and subordinate stage in the development of the philosophical 'idea' which encompasses and *supersedes* all earlier forms of expression. Similarly, although Hegel recognizes the sensuous or material nature of art as its distinguishing characteristic, art is said to express a 'content' which can be more adequately articulated in the form of religious representations or conceptual thought. This attempt to comprehend art from the supposedly 'higher' standpoint of philosophy has been subjected to vigorous criticism. Many artists and philosophers are highly resistant to the idea that art can be superseded by philosophy, insisting that it represents a distinctive and irreducible form of human self-expression which cannot be 'taken up' by any other form of representation. Similarly, Hegel has been criticized for linking art too closely with the concerns of religion and philosophy, thereby neglecting the many other important roles which it fulfils.

Many of Hegel's judgements can now be seen to reflect the tastes and prejudices of his age rather than forming necessary consequences of some absolute philosophical standpoint. Moreover, there is widespread scepticism concerning both the possibility and the desirability of providing the sort of all-encompassing historical and philosophical narrative on which his aesthetics depends. Nonetheless, Hegel's recognition that every work of art belongs to its age and is the product of an historically specific constellation of ideas and values has become an indispensable prerequisite to any serious study of art. With Hegel, the empirical study of the art of the past was combined for the first time with philosophical reflection upon the causes of historical change. This approach was enormously influential on a later generation of scholars, including figures such as Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin and Aby Warburg, who effectively founded art history as an academic discipline in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Wölfflin's recognition that 'not everything is possible at all times' reflects

an essentially Hegelian recognition of the fundamental historicality of the making and appreciation of art.

Hegel's position marks both the high point and the end point of the attempt to articulate human knowledge in a complete and interconnected 'system' of philosophy. The subsequent breakdown of the great idealist systems into a plurality of distinct disciplines or special sciences, each of which was required to secure its own methodology and status as a form of knowledge, has also changed our understanding of the arts. Whereas Hegel could still combine a discussion of all the various arts, including painting, poetry, music, architecture and sculpture, with an account of the changing social and religious function which art has fulfilled since the very inception of human history, this broad field has now become fragmented into a plurality of discrete disciplines. Recent concern with the crossing or breaking down of disciplinary barriers reflects an increasing dissatisfaction with the costs of such specialization. Within aesthetics or art theory, Hegel's approach offers a powerful alternative to formalism, establishing the importance of content to our understanding and appreciation of works of art. Followed through consistently, however, it should also lead us to recognize that reflection on the character and value of art must also encompass reflection upon the important historical changes which both the practice and the concept of art have undergone. The study of art is at the same time the study of its history and of the different conceptual categories through which it has been made and understood.

Notes

1 An earlier work, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, published in 1764, was primarily concerned with issues of moral and social psychology rather than aesthetics.

2 Formed from the Greek word *telos*, meaning 'end' or 'purpose', a teleological judgement is concerned with the identification of higher ends or purposes in nature. Such judgements were seen as a necessary supplement to mechanistic explanations of the natural world. They form the subject of the second part of the *Critique of Judgement*.

3 Kant also develops an important theory of the sublime, drawing upon the work of philosophers such as Edmund Burke and Joseph Addison. For Kant, however, the sublime is restricted to judgements on natural objects alone.

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Chapter 11

E. H. Gombrich and the Tradition of Hegel

David Summers

E. H. Gombrich has described how as a teenager he was given a copy of Max Dvořák's essays, published under the title *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte* (*Art History as the History of Spirit*), and how these essays, written in the later tradition of Hegel's philosophy of history, inspired him to begin the study of the history of art (Gombrich, 1996, p. 11; see also Horowitz, 1998, pp. 315–19). As he pursued his interest, as his own proclivities as an art historian emerged, and, not least, as the great cataclysms of the twentieth century continued to unfold, Gombrich vigorously rejected the idea that works of art may be regarded as expressions of the "spirit of the age" in which they were made. Far from simply leaving Hegel behind, however, Gombrich has sustained a long critique of Hegel's theories of history, a dialogue integral with the successive definitions of his own positions. Thus after decades of art historical scholarship Gombrich may still in a single essay call Hegel "the father of art history," refer to himself as a "run-away Hegelian," and summarize the dangers and fallacies of Hegel's philosophy of history (Gombrich, 1986b, p. 9). And, while firmly rejecting the Hegel of the dialectical vision of universal history together with its vast and pervasive traditions of influence, Gombrich has continued to express his admiration for the more particularizing Hegel of the *Aesthetics.*

Hegel proclaimed that for us moderns art "is and remains a thing of the past" which no longer possesses "genuine truth and life" (Hegel, 1975, p. 11). Once art provided the indispensable sensuous presentation (*Darstellung*) through which spirit became self-aware as distinct from nature, initiating a millennial progressive development through religion to philosophy, in its later stages proceeding not through sensuous presentation (perfected in classical Greek art), but rather through representation (*Vorstellung*) and conceptual thought. We now confront an analytically divided art, considering content, form and the relation between them, not in order to continue to make art (although we do that), but rather to understand art itself philosophically. Hegel's scheme has been foundational for the program and basic theoretical problems of the modern discipline of the history of art, so that Gombrich's interrogation of Hegel has

continued to raise the most basic issues of art historical and cultural historical interpretation.

Gombrich's critique of Hegel belongs to a long tradition of skepticism reaching back to Hegel's own time (see Podro, 1982, for a discussion of Hegel and his influence in the development of art history). From the beginning it was recognized that the extreme generality of Hegel's categories of the history of spirit either selected and excluded historical evidence or enforced a certain interpretation of it, raising the general question of whether history should be done from the bottom up (with no thought given to overall unity) or from the top down, and the historiographic tradition descending from Hegel might be described as a series of attempts adequately to describe the relations between the particularity and the interrelatedness of historical events. In the terms of this very broad debate, Gombrich has remained within what might be called the continually self-critical branch of the traditions stemming from Hegel's philosophy of history.

In the work of scholars associated with the library formed in Hamburg by Aby Warburg (later the Warburg Institute in London, of which Gombrich was director), Gombrich distinguished early on between "spiritual historical parallels" in historical explanation and more properly philological connections (see Ginzburg, 1989, pp. 17–59). Gombrich's characterization of the work of Warburg himself is much like his own emergent project in its main outlines. Warburg, Gombrich writes at one point, left to one side the "stylistic approach to art" upon which art historical theory had been centered since Winckelmann and Hegel, preferring to regard the history of art as an arena of continual "choice and conflict" rather than as manifestations of the *Zeitgeist* in parallel cultural manifestations (Gombrich, 1986, pp. 313–14). Gombrich thus attributes to Warburg the fundamental intellectual attitude stated for example in the Introduction to his *Art and Illusion* (1960). There he opposes the Hegelianism of Alois Riegl and Hans Sedlmayr, which "weakens resistance to totalitarian habits of mind"; rather than a divination of the spirits of ages and races, "the history of taste and fashion is the history of preferences, of various acts of choice between given alternatives" (Gombrich, 1960, p. 20). No choice is possible without real alternatives, which also imply difference and possible conflicts.

By the time he made these last arguments, Gombrich referred, as he has often done, to the writings of Karl Popper. Popper's *Logic of Scientific Discovery* was first published in Vienna in 1935, and Gombrich heard the arguments that were to become *The Poverty of Historicism* in 1936 (the book itself was not published until 1957) (see Gombrich, 1979a, p. 60). *The Open Society and its Enemies* was published in London in 1945. Popper was to become a third discussant in Gombrich's conversation with Hegel, as well as a major guide for Gombrich's project of a post-Hegelian art history. As his warnings against totalitarian habits of thought might lead us to expect, Gombrich shares Popper's sense of the moral urgency of the need to examine and criticize Hegelian ideas. Their vast currency in the modern world, Popper writes, points to "the existence of a vacuum, of a place which it is the task of sociology to fill with something more sensible, such

as the analysis of problems rising within a tradition" (Popper 1957, p. 149; quoted in Gombrich, 1960, p. 21).

If as modern people we are inclined to take ideas like culture and progress for granted, Gombrich has many times argued that we may be Hegelians whether we have read a word of Hegel or not, and in such circumstances it is the special responsibility of the historian of culture not only to describe cultures, but constantly to examine the presumed principles of their unity and continuity. The reasons for such concern are not far to find. Max Mueller can hardly have imagined the consequences of his suggestion that speakers of Indo-Germanic languages are descendants of Aryans; but when this suggestion became "history," and the basis for cultural generalizations about peoples, when it was magnified by the larger scheme of national and racial "spirits," it contributed to the perverse misjustification of millions of individual acts of murder (Gombrich, 1963a, p. 107). In the historicist dimension of such generalization, the belief that the sublime purposes of history are discernible, and that we can absolutely justify our actions through the knowledge of the workings of overarching historical progress, is an equally deeply dangerous one. Before we worship at the altar of history, Gombrich argues, citing Kant, we must be ready to bear the responsibility of having uncritically acknowledged its absoluteness (Gombrich, 1986b, p. 9).

Since Gombrich makes no essential distinction between Hegel and Marx – for him, both raise exactly the same problems, if in opposing metaphysical terms – "Hegel" represents a cluster of interrelated theoretical and historical issues very familiar in contemporary debates. Sometimes Gombrich's "Hegelianism" is shorthanded as "evolutionism" (see for example Gombrich, 1960, p. 22), and, seen in such general terms, Hegel arguably did more than any other writer to shape what has become modern Western common sense about history in general, that it is universal, that it is progressive, and that all cultures may be located along the continuum of universal progress. It is at this level of broad generality and assumption that Hegel's theory of history is, according to Gombrich, part of modern mythology, a major Baconian idol to be toppled.

The historical influence of Gombrich's Hegel has long since diverged from the immediate textual tradition of Hegel's writing, and kinds of art historical inference one might now scarcely associate with Hegel at all are thus fundamental to the tradition of ideas Gombrich rejects as Hegelian. One of the most basic of these ideas is *expression*, which underlies what Gombrich considers a habit of invalid historical inference to which art historians have been especially prone, and against which they must always be on guard. We are very accustomed to hearing, for example, that Raphael's *School of Athens* (1510–11) expresses "the spirit of the High Renaissance." But according to Gombrich we cannot trust the deceptive ease with which we see a work of art, first as a characteristic unity, then as an outwardness fully "expressing" a personal or collective inwardness. This version of what Gombrich calls the "physiognomic fallacy" has a corollary, what might be called the "gestalt fallacy," according to which the "simultaneous grasp

of overall form" in the work of art becomes the "vision" of an artist or of a whole culture (Gombrich, 1963c, pp. 78–85).[1] Any jump from putative "expression" to a culture understood as the manifestation of one spirit, in Gombrich's vivid diagrammatic terms, of one "center" (Gombrich, 1979b, p. 31), is inadmissible. We cannot suppose we "see" artists in the forms of their art; and when we raise the metaphor of "style" a power, from the distinct character of the stylus, "pen" or "hand" of an individual to the stylus, "pen" or "hand" of a place or time – the "Central Italian style," the "Renaissance style" – we have introduced even more problems. At this second, metaphorical level, place and time in effect become "super-artists" (Gombrich, 1963c, p. 79 [the term is Malraux's]), anthropomorphic entities in their own right, and, even if this is not made explicit, the question of the nature of the implicit entity remains. A historian of art may recognize at once that several paintings are all "High Renaissance," but it must not be assumed that this evident similarity, which implies cultural cogency, can be explained by participation in a single "spirit."

Such faulty inference from works of art themselves is complemented by the now deeply institutionalized assumption that the "periods" of art history are somehow essentially different from one another. For Gombrich, the nineteenth-century view of the change from the *Christian* Middle Ages to the *pagan* Renaissance – to take that example – is "Hegelian" because it is totalizing and essentializing, implying that the same characterization extends to all cultural aspects of the two periods. Again, Aby Warburg is put forward as one of the first to see the situation as more complex, to show, for example, that representative Renaissance people actually were religious, a crack in the monolithic conception that began to promise a history of real choices and relations (Gombrich, 1963a, pp. 115–16).

A second key "Hegelian" idea is *progress*, which Gombrich characteristically does not simply dismiss. He argues instead that the project of cultural history entails some idea of progress (Gombrich, 1979b, p. 27), which must, however, always be regarded as local, never as universal. Again, this runs counter to what have become common assumptions, since the idea of progress is a deeply modern idea for which Hegel provided absolute metaphysical and theological grounds.

If we try to find the roots of the seemingly ineradicable assumption of art historians (and others) that the history of art and culture "develops" toward the present, however that may be understood, then we soon find ourselves once again in the tradition of Hegel. Many suppose that progress in art is the development toward "realism" in representation, but Gombrich also sees a major influence of Hegel's historiography in the idea and institution of the avant-garde, which has been fundamental for modernist culture in general, and for Modernism in art in particular (Gombrich, 1986b, p. 8). The demand that cultural expression "be of its time," or "express" its time also implies essentialist notions of the kind against which Gombrich warns, and critics have long been in the habit of finding their way through the myriad productions of contemporary artists by pronouncing some authentically modern, others not, by relating their work to most

current thought (e.g., Poststructuralism now trumps Existentialism) or simply by embracing the newest or most novel. But appeal to the "spirit" of the modern age turns criticism into advocacy, and for Gombrich these ideas are yoked to historicist necessitarianism. Finally it is as necessary to find explanations for the reflexive preference for the new as it is to explain the premodern authority of tradition (Gombrich, 1991a, p. 51). Gombrich's arguments would seem to imply an "open" critical situation, and his own evident preference for naturalistic and classical artistic traditions must be rooted in other criteria.

Gombrich has summarized the Hegelian tradition in terms of five giants with "weird names" (Gombrich, 1984, p. 63). The first giant is *aesthetic transcendentalism*, the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition that came to Hegel most immediately from Winckelmann. This "transcendentalism" should not be taken to mean that there is an Idea of the Beautiful, but rather that aesthetic principles are presumed to be transcendent in whatever historical form they may assume. Aesthetic transcendentalism gives an absolute dimension to historical or national culture, thus to provide a footing for the second "giant," *historical collectivism.* We may speak routinely of the characters of whole nationalities and regions, and of the styles of decades or centuries, but transcendentalism and collectivism give these generalizations another valence, making it possible to speak of style as the expression of a single common "spirit." Synchronic transcendentalism and collectivism are in their turn galvanized to diachronic life by *historical determinism*, also called historicism, again after Karl Popper. According to the principle of historical determinism, human activities are not so much determined by previous events as they are dictated as it were from above, by the logic-like necessity of the dialectic of the history of spirit. Gombrich follows tradition in distinguishing between "right" and "left" Hegelians. The former ("idealists") see the overarching sense of history in terms of more or less general progress, the latter ("materialists") see the working out of the dialectic in terms of the history of the production and distribution of wealth. Both wings of Hegelianism fall under the shadow of Gombrich's fourth giant, what he calls *metaphysical optimism*, the shared assumption that history taken altogether is teleological and progressive, that it moves with necessity toward a positive end, the realization of human freedom or, what is the same thing in materialist terms, the equal sharing of the means of production.

In natural science, teleological explanation is premodern. We no longer account for change as the realization over time of potential form, and Gombrich regards the mythology of modern Romantic historiography as a survival of discredited premodern ideas. By distinguishing forms, Aristotle thought he could determine real principles, principles which function as the ends toward which things develop by nature, and, citing Popper, Gombrich sees the teleological view of nations and of history as an imposition of comparable ideas to reified "spirits," that is, as the overarching utopian *telos* of historical determinism, the full diachronic magnification of aesthetic transcendentalism and historical collectivism. Gombrich thus argues that modern historians of culture have retained

the half-magical essentialism of Aristotle, still confusing taxonomy with ontology and teleology (Gombrich, 1966a, pp. 87–8). To be sure, the early modern rejection of forms, final causes, virtues and essences did not solve the question of aetiology once and for all, but rather opened it up in endlessly fruitful ways. Gombrich thus points in the direction of a history less dangerously obscured by "exegesis" (Gombrich, 1979b, p. 42), the Romantic divination of higher or deeper "idealist" or "materialist" truths behind what are in effect the allegories of historical events.

Gombrich's fifth and last Hegelian giant is *relativism*, which he calls the "official dogma of contemporary art historical teaching" (Gombrich, 1984b, p. 65). In the history of art, Alois Riegl, one of the many later writers who tried to save Hegel from himself by devising what Gombrich calls "Hegel without metaphysics," established what in principle is a nonteleological perceptual basis for all styles and cultures with his notion of "Kunstwollen" – even though Riegl's account of Western art is deeply Hegelian (Gombrich, 1979b, pp. 42–7). Gombrich acknowledges that such relativization has yielded many positive understandings, but, even if all traditions of art have their own validity, they cannot therefore be described in terms of a common spirit or essence.

Gombrich's five Hegelian giants might be taken to imply a positive program for an oppositional history: so, for example, the aesthetic is *not* transcendental, culture is *not* collective, and so on through the list. This quasi-dialectic generates a whole set of problems, and therefore also suggests determinate paths of investigation.

The *Geistesgeschichte* of Wilhelm Dilthey is perhaps the preeminent example of "Hegel without metaphysics," and, once the pattern is recognized, it will also be seen to have become fairly common in academic and even popular usage. "Hegel without metaphysics" turned out to be Hegel with some kind of psychology, and writers who tried to bring Hegel up to date typically posited more or less collective *Weltanschauungen* or "mentalities," or general cultural developments of "vision," or "perception," or "imagination" from haptic to optic, or from will to attention (in the case of Riegl), or from linear to painterly, in the case of Heinrich Wölfflin. For Gombrich this improvement upon Hegel is a distinction without a difference, and still commits the fundamental methodological error of essentialism; when we invoke such collective psychological entities we are still accounting for historical change by appealing to a single reductive principle.

Such criticisms notwithstanding, Gombrich's own *Art and Illusion* may be viewed as a continuation as well as a critique of the tradition of "Hegel without metaphysics." It is a continuation because it begins from the assumption that more or less consistent cultural styles both exist and demand explanation, and because it offers explanations of styles in terms of such psychological categories as "conceptual images," Popper's "searchlight theory of perception," or information theory. It points in other directions, however, to the extent that these psychological categories always have a basic art historical component. The

development of styles of optical naturalism always begins, not from nature, but from what Gombrich calls "schemata"; these are already "made" in some way, that is, already culturally defined, and it is from such a standpoint that observation and matching must always begin.

Since schemata, which take the place of psychological "concepts" prior to experience, are not only given, but positively *made*, they imply having been made, just as progress toward naturalism involves the development of specific *skills*. When he wrote *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich expressly placed himself in the tradition of Pliny the Elder and Giorgio Vasari, who chronicled Greek and Renaissance art in large part as the progressive ability to achieve illusion in two dimensions, and, in general, traditions of artmaking are not simply records of feats of imagination, they are traditions of the gradual mastery of specific skills by means of which certain things are in turn able to be imagined. Greek painters were said to have begun from outlined shadows, to which were successively contributed such things as modeling, foreshortening, and the depiction of emotion, finally to culminate in great masters like Zeuxis and Apelles. And so in any tradition, local traditions of skill not only determine what is done but what is taught, and provide the grounds upon which criticism, competition, and elaboration take place. Teaching, criticism, and competition are all social and cultural (and socially and culturally connected) in ways pure imagination is not, and the local character of skills (and therefore of progress) pushes primary art historical explanation in the direction of culturally specific artistic problem solving, but also of more general societal articulation and activity (Gombrich, 1979a). Further drawing out the implications of his stress upon art as skill, Gombrich has come to stress what he calls the "technological" dimension of art, thus also loosening the ties between art history and aesthetics (Gombrich, 1991b, pp. 67–71). In doing so, he also departed more pronouncedly from the tradition of "Hegel without metaphysics," embracing Popper's (and Marx's) rejection of "psychologism" in the course of formulating a post-Hegelian sociology of art (Gombrich, 1979a, p. 61).

Gombrich associates pre-scientific (and pre-Darwinian) Aristotelian teleology not only with the gargantuan historical teleology he calls Hegelian, but with the idea of the organic (and aesthetic) unity of the work of art and its generic "development." Gombrich is distrustful of these putative synchronic and diachronic unities, which tend to be regarded as essential, thus both to imply and to demand the deepest and most telling kinds of interpretation. Suspension of these ancient and complex assumptions about unity raises the most fundamental questions about art and its interpretation. But works of art, Gombrich urges, should be regarded as "complex orders," the consequence of various historical conditions and alternatives together with individual choice and judgment (Gombrich, 1966b).

Hegel may be seen as an early modern contextualist in that he tried to describe consciousness, not simply in itself, but in constitutive interrelation with nature, culture, and history. In these terms, Hegel is a founder of modern thought in

general, and if it has come to be more or less agreed that mind and culture are essentially interrelated, there are perhaps more distinct echoes of Hegel's remark that art "is a thing of the past" in Gombrich's observation that modern artists cannot be primitive again, and that the way to such a state "is barred by the angel with a flaming sword" (Gombrich, 1963a, p. 11). Again, the "beholder's share" of *Art and Illusion*, however much defined in the terms of the psychology of perception, retains something of Hegel's "Romantic" art of painting, the two-dimensionality and near-immateriality of which give free rein to subjectivity, to individual feeling, imagination, and freedom.

In "Norm and Form," first delivered as a lecture in 1963, Gombrich argued that the sequence of Western art historical styles – Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Mannerist, baroque – was established largely by the rehabilitation of styles negatively defined with respect to the Renaissance norm of Classicism. So styles first defined and criticized as nonclassical, unclassical, and anticlassical became more nearly neutral and more properly taxonomic as the sequence was smoothed into its present form. This interpretation might be viewed as an essay in dialectics, culminating in, and made possible by, the modern idea of art as part of a general anthropology; that is, Classicism and its opposites were finally embraced by the more general category of art, which then began to embrace artifacts and images from outside the Western tradition itself. (There is, for example, much overlap between Mannerism, Modernism, and "primitivism" as "anticlassical," and the three categories reinforced one another in the early twentieth century.) For Gombrich, however, this dialectical sequence has no polar psychological base, cannot have been progressive, and at no point could anything but real choices have been made. To say that the core of the Western artistic tradition is classical, is, according to Gombrich, to say that the classical has always represented a choice to be made or not made in one or another situation. To be "classical" is to devise solutions that avoid certain negative choices. "Maybe we would make more progress in the study of styles if we looked out for such principles of exclusion, the sins any particular style wants to avoid, than if we continue to look for the common structure or essence of all works produced in a certain period" (Gombrich, 1966a, p. 89).[2]

If choices are always made, why do some choices come to predominate? Why did the architecture of the late Middle Ages change from Romanesque to Gothic? Toward an answer to such questions, Gombrich offers the distinction between "periods" and "movements" (Gombrich, 1979b, pp. 50–1). The first is Hegelian, the second is post-Hegelian. Movements are begun by individuals and groups of individuals (who may be artists, patrons, both, or others altogether) for specific purposes. Movements coexist, conflict, break up, succeed, and fail. Movements also leave historical traces and have all kinds of historical affiliations. The Renaissance is Gombrich's paradigmatic movement, which means that unexamined characterization of the period as "pagan," "humanist," or "neoclassical" is not only an unwarrantable essentialization, it also conceals historical complexity, and

in doing so conceals the many contexts of actual choice. Again, a more concrete dialectic begins to emerge if alternatives are considered to be mutually determining and perhaps antagonistic (as classicism and its various opposites have usually been.)

As might be expected of a lifelong critic of Hegel, Gombrich's work has proceeded unsystematically, although it must also quickly be said that its guiding principles have been consistent from the beginning. *Art and Illusion*, first published in 1960, is Gombrich's most influential book, no doubt partly because of the broader interest of the perceptual psychology, semiotics, and information theory in terms of which Gombrich explained the history of art. *Art and Illusion* has been interpreted very differently, and in his responses to these readings Gombrich has necessarily continued to debate much the same issues.[3] From the standpoint of the present chapter, however, the identification of Gombrich's project with *Art and Illusion* has the disadvantage of fixing his investigations at a point at which he was taking leave of the psychologism of "Hegel without metaphysics." The "schemata" of *Art and Illusion* look very different if considered in the long diachronic series of Gombrich's studies of the representation of light in Western painting, and iconography looks very different in light of such properly iconological essays as his examination of allegory in relation to Western art (see the title essays in Gombrich, 1976 and 1972). When naturalism is addressed in the context of such issues, art history has assumed the dimensions of a cultural history. The "beholder's share" may be expanded from the simply perceptual to the competence of the historical user of art, who knew the meanings iconographers must now reconstruct, as well as the decorums of the genres and institutions within which art had its earlier meanings (Gombrich, 1972, pp. 1–25).

Gombrich's stance toward Hegel might be summarized as follows: Hegel must be acknowledged as a major originator of the modern systematic investigation of human culture, but his own explanations for culture are unacceptable. Rejection of Hegel's explanations, however, presses the demand for alternatives, not least because Hegel's ideas have had a robust life to the present. Gombrich's lingering tie to Hegel is thus a skeptical faith in the cogency of cultures. Gombrich makes a distinction between historical "cataloguing" and "seeking relationships between things." In this formulation, the tradition of Hegel persists minimally as the assumption that there are connections to be found. But skepticism regarding Romantic exegetic interpretation is by no means negative, rather it means that in all cases relationships must be demonstrated, that the "continuities and contiguities" relevant to the explanation of any work of art are exactly what art and cultural history are about (Gombrich, 1979b, p. 55). As these diachronic and synchronic relations are investigated, works of art become more concretely historical, not less, and explanation exclusively in terms of a single principle not only diminishes the study of history, it takes its own place in the history of Romantic historiography.

Notes

1 See also Gombrich, 1963b. Gombrich links physiognomic perception to regression, which in turn leads him to view much Modernist expression and abstraction with suspicion. These issues have more to do with psychoanalysis than with Hegel, but Gombrich seems to believe that regressive historical criticism of works of art is an ominous partner for more properly "Hegelian" inferences from art to individual or collective "spirits." See also Gombrich, 1966b, pp. 64–80.

2 The crucial text in Aristotle is *Poetics*, 1449a15–16: "after going through many changes, it [tragedy] stopped when it had found its own natural form (*physis*)" (Aristotle, 1982, pp. 17–19).

3 Nelson Goodman (1976) extended the analogy to language, but Norman Bryson (1983) rejected the "perceptualism" of *Art and Illusion* as representative of the Western classical mimetic tradition with which Gombrich in fact identifies, offering a version of a semiotic, materialist account of Western representation according to which the constituting "signs" of painting must be understood in terms of discursive practices also constituting a subject. Gombrich's critique of Hegel has been appropriated for arguments much like Bryson's by Keith Moxey (1998).

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Chapter 12

German Romanticism and French Aesthetic Theory

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Romanticism is a notoriously difficult term to define, even within the boundaries of one national culture. But it was a movement that swept Europe over several decades, encompassing many art forms, and challenging traditional artistic theory. The question of the impact of German Romanticism on French aesthetic theory is further complicated by the fact that – particularly in the early period – selective and often misinterpreted aspects of it were the most influential.

Chronology of German Romanticism

Romanticism had developed in Germany from the Storm and Stress (*Sturm und Drang*) movement of the 1770s to take hold there in the 1790s, and lasted well into the 1830s. Storm and Stress emphasized the importance of nature and of freedom, and its subject matter often included the exaltation of 'genius' and both physical and emotional strength. A manifesto of the movement, a collection of essays by various authors, entitled *On German Character and Art*, was published by Herder (1773) and included essays on Ossian, on folksong and the importance of folklore, on Shakespeare and on Gothic architecture. Goethe's account of the Storm and Stress movement in *Poetry and Truth* is one of the most important documents of the movement. The movement was also confused in France with German Romanticism, many of the early works of French Romanticism having more in common with Storm and Stress than with *Romantik*. Another factor which prepared the way for German Romanticism was the publication of Kant's three *Critiques*, the last of which, the *Critique of Judgement*, appeared in 1790. At least, interpretations and rewritings of these works lay at the heart of much Romantic philosophy.

German Romanticism itself is commonly divided into three phases. 'Early Romanticism' lasted approximately from 1796 to 1804/6, and its activity was centred primarily around Jena (it is sometimes referred to as *Jena Romantik*). Work of this period was predominantly theoretical and philosophical. Building

on Storm and Stress, it moved away from the emphasis on spontaneity and vigour to a more analytical, contemplative mode. Underpinned by pantheistic theories of the unity of the human soul with nature, it sought for an essential harmony underpinning the universe. Some of the most important work of this period includes Schelling's *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, Wackenroder and Tieck's *Confessions of an Art-Loving Friar* (1796, dated 1797), and the journal of the Jena group, *Athenaeum* (which was founded in 1798 by Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel to put forward the new ideas on art and aesthetics). 1798 also saw the publication of the collection of philosophical and poetical aphorisms penned by Novalis under the title *Pollen*. August Schlegel began his *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* in 1801. And in 1800, Beethoven composed the first great 'subjective' work of musical composition, the C minor piano concerto.

The second phase, mid- or high Romanticism (sometimes known as *Heidelberger Romantik*) stretched from 1804/6 to 1815 (the year of the Congress of Vienna) or 1816. In general terms, it may be said that this period saw the theories evolved in the earlier phase being put into artistic practice. To this period belong the works of Hoffmann (which were to be highly influential in France), Kleist and Chamisso. Friedrich's *The Monk by the Sea* was shown at the Berlin Academy exhibition of 1810. In 1809, the Nazarenes formed their Guild of St Luke and left Vienna for Rome, where they lived out the precepts outlined in the work of Wackenroder and Tieck. Schubert's earliest *Lieder* also belong to this period.

The third period, 'late Romanticism', ran from 1815/16 to the 1830s and beyond. This period of German Romanticism has perhaps less direct influence in France. Theoretical activity waned and generally became more conservative. But some of the momentum in Germany was maintained, particularly in works by Heine and Eichendorff, and in musical compositions by Weber and Schumann.

Precepts

It is perhaps easiest to understand Romanticism historically in contrast to the Enlightenment emphasis on scientific enquiry and rationalism, and to the formal constraints of Classicism (although the relationship of Classicism to Romanticism in Germany is rather different from that in France). Romanticism privileged subjectivity and introspection against reason. Kant, whose work can be seen as a product of Enlightenment thinking, nonetheless provided stimulus for the thought of the Romantic era. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), he had argued that the scope of human knowledge and rationality was limited, and that beyond knowledge lay a mysterious source of the universe, 'the thing in itself'. This could not be known, but might be glimpsed through creative perception. Although Kant had insisted (particularly in his later works) on the existence of external reality, his argument was read as an incitement to subjectivity. The

relationship of the Romantics to Kant is complex, as is their relationship to Schelling; but the Romantics derived from these thinkers the notion that humankind's inner life held the key to the secrets of the universe. 'The mysterious way leads inwards', wrote Novalis, and 'within ourselves or nowhere lies eternity with its worlds, the past and the future' (1965–77, 2, p. 232). Closely associated with this idea was an emphasis on emotion. The painter Caspar David Friedrich, for instance, wrote that 'The artist's feeling is his law' (Friedrich, 1988, p. 49).

There was a widespread, metaphysical desire among the Romantics to apprehend the mysterious beauties of existence which defied rational explanation, and to communicate them through art. This gave rise to the longing for an 'ideal' of some kind which characterized much artistic production of the Romantic period. 'The poetry of the ancients was that of possessing', wrote August Wilhelm Schlegel; 'ours is that of longing' (1966–7, 1, p. 25). This 'longing' was characterized by Novalis through the symbol of 'the blue flower': it could take the form of a purely metaphysical longing for an abstract and unattainable ideal, or that of the search for an ideal love, or the struggle of the artist to produce an ideal work of art.

There was also a widespread aspiration to the infinite among the Romantics. The artist's relationship with the external world became transformed through this metaphysical quest: it gave rise to a renewed interest in nature and humankind's place within it. Much thinking of the recent past had subjected nature and the world around to scientific enquiry as a means of control, and much landscape painting in Germany had been characterized by order and arrangement. The Romantics, by contrast, were more contemplative and passive in their attitude to nature because they hoped to commune with the spirit of the universe. In the words of Novalis: 'The soul of the individual should achieve harmony with the soul of the world' (Novalis, 2000, p. 913). These beliefs can perhaps be seen most clearly in those works of Caspar David Friedrich that represent nature as powerful, untamed by humans, and vast. Humans – where they appear at all – are represented as contemplating their place within the scheme of things as small, often lone, figures usually seen from behind, who gaze out at the landscape or seascape depicted. Their anonymity suggests the universality of the experience and invites identification.

For the Romantics, the creative artist – whether painter, poet, sculptor or musician – was privileged with the sensitivity and insight to express this experience in symbolic terms. According to August Wilhelm Schlegel, 'Writing poetry is nothing but an eternal process of symbolising' (1963, p. 81). The belief in an underlying harmony to the universe led to a belief that harmony in art was its expression. And the idea gradually developed that the purest work of art would combine all art forms: it would appeal simultaneously to all the senses and induce a heightened form of perception in which the human soul would commune with the spirit of the universe. Runge and Tieck, for instance, collaborated in an

attempt to form an abstract pictorial musical poem with choruses incorporating all three major art forms, together with an appropriate architectural setting (the project was never brought to completion, however). The author E. T. A. Hoffmann (who was intermittently a professional conductor) was also a composer and an accomplished painter and draughtsman, and his writings also highlight the close relationship between the different art forms. This aspect of Romantic thought manifests itself as well in the development of the *Lied* and the symphonic poem, and finds expression later in the century with Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art), and in Baudelaire's theory of *correspondances*.

The artist's creative experience is described in the influential collection of essays by Wackenroder and Tieck entitled *Confessions of an Art-Loving Friar* (1991). This introduces the concept of 'art piety' in which art and the artist assume a quasi-religious status. For E. T. A. Hoffmann, the ideal reaction to life was that of the artist; but the artist's extreme sensitivity was also considered a mixed blessing. Many literary works depict the solitary life of the artist, unable to conform to the exigencies of the material world, misunderstood by (bourgeois) society. Furthermore, this incompatibility with the world around him, combined often with the impossibility of attaining his 'ideal', could lead to severe melancholy, and so this became a recurrent motif in the Romantic aesthetic. (It must be emphasized, however, that the characteristic 'mal du siècle' associated with the early French Romantics is more akin to the 'Weltschmerz' of Storm and Stress than to German Romanticism proper.) The artist's search for the infinite could also lead to an exploration of the fantastic and the supernatural, of different levels of consciousness, and of the distinctions between dream and reality. In its more extreme manifestations it could lead to questioning about the borderline between madness and sanity.

Examining literature in a historical context, August Schlegel speaks of the 'contrast which is so striking between the ancient or Classical and the Romantic' (1966–7, 1, p. 23). He distinguishes between, on the one hand, French Classicism with its rigid rules and inhibiting constraints, and on the other, the spontaneity of the romances and ballads of the Middle Ages (1966–7, 2, p. 40). This kind of distinction led to a desire to construct a new national 'mythology' on which writers might draw for inspiration. And there was a surge of interest in folk songs and ballads, folklore and fairytales among the Romantics. This search for more appropriate subject matter also led to an interest in both France and Germany in medieval and biblical models.

Whereas Classicism imposed rules on subject matter and form, the Romantics claimed the freedom to express their sentiments in whatever subject matter or form they chose. In France, the early Romantics paid more attention to the possibilities of form and subject matter than to the philosophical underpinning of German Romanticism; these were not fully explored until the works of Baudelaire (see below).

The Reception in France

Romanticism manifested itself fully in France only in the 1820s. Although it is possible to discern the germs of some of its salient features in the sensibility of writers such as Rousseau, a number of factors prevented its development. First of all, the literary establishment clung to the precepts of French Classicism which had long been predominant. Also, prior to the nineteenth century, French culture had tended to be inward-looking, and had shown very little interest in things German, especially as Germany was not considered to be worthy of attention as a 'real' country in its own right. The one substantial exception to this general French disdain had been Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Published in Germany in 1774, it was translated rapidly and achieved almost immediate success in France.

The next major factor to influence the reception of German thought in France was the work of Mme de Staël. Her political views and cosmopolitan attitudes brought her into conflict with Napoleon, and she was sent into exile on occasions, notably after the publication of *On Literature* in 1800. Some of her time in exile was spent in Germany, where she studied its language and cultural institutions. In 1810, her ultimately influential work *On Germany* was published in France; but the book was banned, copies were seized, and Mme de Staël was again sent into exile. (The strength of the reaction is telling about the fear of any challenge to French cultural supremacy.) *De l'Allemagne* (*On Germany*) was then reprinted in London and became available in France in 1814.

Despite a number of chapters on German philosophy and criticism, the most influential aspect of Mme de Staël's book was its focus on the opposition of the Romantic and the Classical in literature. There are nonetheless elements of German Romantic criticism in Mme de Staël's work which are sometimes nowadays overlooked, but which were to prove – directly or indirectly – influential to the development of later 'Romantic' French aesthetic theory. Building on ideas expounded in *On Literature*, Mme de Staël argues that European literature derives from two main sources: the paganism which influenced the Classical traditions of the Southern, Latin races, and the roots of Christianity which influenced the literature of the colder Northern climes. In 'On Classical and Romantic poetry' (Staël, 1958, 2, p. xi), she objects to the common usage of the word 'Classicism' as synonymous with 'perfection'. 'Classical', for Mme de Stäel, is associated with 'imitation', whereas 'modern' is associated with 'inspiration' (2, pp. 133–4). That which distinguishes a work of art from an imitation is the input of imagination, a faculty termed by Schleiermacher 'the highest and most fundamental quality of mankind'. Its function in the production of a work of art is defined by Mme de Stäel in the following terms:

> The impression received through the Fine Arts has nothing at all in common with the pleasure experienced through an imitation of any sort. Man has in his soul innate feelings which real objects will never satisfy, and it is these feelings to

> which the imagination of painters and poets can give form and life. (Staël, 1958, 4, p. 226)

This quotation was important to Delacroix and is reproduced in full in the volume of 'aesthetic studies' forming part of his *Literary Works* (see Mras, 1966, p. 50). Writing in 1857, Delacroix described the imagination as 'the first quality of the artist' (1950, 3, p. 44), and Baudelaire (who greatly admired Delacroix and was profoundly influenced by his work) centred his *Salon de 1859* on the function of the imagination in artistic creation, terming it the 'queen of the faculties'.

In general terms, for Mme de Stäel, the aim of the artist is to 'liberate the sentiment imprisoned in the depths of the soul' (1958, 2, p. 114). In a chapter on 'The Fine Arts in Germany', she argues that: 'the arts are above thought; their language is one of colours, forms or sounds. If it were possible to imagine the impressions which our soul would register before knowing speech, we would better be able to understand the effect of painting and music' (1958, 3, p. 377). Delacroix recognizes the importance of this statement to his own theory of painting. In his *Journal*, he notes: 'I find in Mme de Stäel exactly the formulation of my idea about painting. This art, and likewise music, are above thought; hence their advantage over literature, through their vagueness' (1950, 1, p. 50). Hence, for Delacroix, following Mme de Stäel, art was the most effective medium for one 'soul' to communicate with another.

In the meantime, however, other aspects of German thought began to filter their way into France, largely through a number of newly founded newspapers and reviews. August Wilhelm Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* were translated into French by Mme de Stäel and were published in 1814 (however, they do not appear to have been very well known and the next edition did not appear until 1865). Goethe's *Faust I* was translated into French, notably by Gérard de Nerval in 1828, and exerted a considerable influence on the development of literature, while also providing subject matter for artists and musicians. Translations of Kant became available in France from 1835 (the *Critique of Judgement* was translated in 1846), and Victor Cousin's assessment of the *Critique of Pure Reason* appeared in 1842. These works were not, however, widely read, and it is probably fair to say that more knowledge of German Romantic theory came through translations of literature.

One of the most influential authors to be translated was E. T. A. Hoffmann, whose works encapsulated a number of theories. Loève-Veimars began work on his translations of the tales in 1829. The first volumes were a huge success and rival translations began to appear with rapidity: soon the country was swept by a 'Hoffmann vogue'. Although different aspects of Hoffmann's work captured the French interest at different times (influencing writers such as Nodier, Musset, Nerval, Gautier and Balzac in terms of theme and form and providing subject matter for artists and musicians), the major developments in French aesthetic theory most closely connected to German Romanticism, and Hoffmann in

particular, occurred in the 1840s and beyond. During this period Baudelaire produced some of his most influential work, which, while highly original, owes much to German Romantic theory (as well as to Delacroix, Poe, Wagner, and Stendhal *inter alia*). And although Baudelaire may well have been aware of the work of other German theorists, Hoffmann is the source he singles out in frequent references and direct quotations.

In the second chapter of his *Salon de 1846*, Baudelaire defines Romanticism in the following terms: 'Romanticism is synonymous with modern art: that is to say, intimacy, spirituality, colour, the aspiration to the infinite, expressed by all the means available to the arts' (1976, 2, p. 421). Romanticism resides not so much in the subject matter as in 'the manner of feeling' (1976, 2, p. 420). Significantly, Baudelaire highlights the way in which he considers Romanticism as misunderstood by his predecessors: 'They sought it in the outside world, but it could only be found within themselves' (1976, 2, p. 420). For Baudelaire, Delacroix is the Romantic painter *par excellence*: he is an artist who uses nature as a 'dictionary' in order to communicate an 'intimate thought' (1976, 2, p. 433). The model on its own is thus incomplete, it becomes a work of art only through the 'tempérament' of the artist. The importance of colour in art, and in Romantic art in particular, is also highlighted. Using musical terminology, Baudelaire elaborates a theory of colour according to which there exist 'tones which are gay and playful, playful and sad, rich and gay, rich and sad, commonplace and original' (1976, 2, p. 425), and in this connection he quotes a passage from Loève-Veimars's translation of Hoffmann's *Kreisleriana*:

> I do not know if any analogist has drawn up a complete table of colours and their corresponding sentiments, but I recall a passage in Hoffmann that expresses my idea perfectly. . . . 'It is not only in dreams and in the slightly delirious state that comes before sleep, but also when I am fully awake, when I hear music, that I find an analogy and a close connection between colours, sounds and smells. It seems to me that all these things have sprung from one single ray of light, and that they are destined to come together in a wonderful concert. The scent of brown and red marigolds in particular produces a magical effect on me. It makes me fall into a profound reverie and then, as if from afar, I hear the deep and solemn sounds of the oboe. (Baudelaire, 1976, 2, pp. 425–6)

The idea voiced here is that of the interdependence of the senses, which implies the possibility of the transposition of expression from one domain to another. This idea lies at the heart of Baudelaire's famous sonnet 'Correspondances' from *The Flowers of Evil* (1857), which Baudelaire quotes himself in his article on Wagner. (The specific reference to 'symbols' in 'Correspondances' furthermore harks back to Schlegel's prescriptions.) The ultimate goal of the artist is then the perception of analogies in privileged moments of heightened sensitivity which contain a vision of the harmony underpinning existence.

The subjectivity of the artistic experience and the possibility of transposing that experience from one art form to another also had implications for criticism.

The best criticism, according to Baudelaire, is that which is 'entertaining and poetic' (1976, 2, p. 428). Since a beautiful painting is 'nature reflected by an artist' (1976, 2, p. 418), by a similar process, the best criticism will be 'that picture reflected by an intelligent and sensitive mind' (1976, 2, p. 418). At once 'reasonable and passionate' (1976, 2, p. 419), the critic should be able to express his own experience of the work of art in an appropriate manner, so 'the best account of a picture may be a sonnet or an elegy' (1976, 2, p. 418). (And a number of poems in *The Flowers of Evil* are transpositions of works of art.)

The escape from everyday reality to the perception of a higher poetic ideal is a fundamental theme of Baudelaire's creative writing. It is achieved – and expressed – through the intermediary of the senses working in conjunction with the imagination (*Salon de 1859*). The whole process is described as the 'dream!' – but Baudelaire adds: 'I do not mean by that word the chaotic ramblings of the night, but the vision produced by intense meditation, or in less fertile brains, by an artificial stimulant' (1976, 2, pp. 636–7). (In his essay *On Wine and Hashish* of 1851, Baudelaire outlines the potential role of artificial stimulants, taking for his starting point for the section on wine Hoffmann's prescriptions from the *Kreisleriana* for particular types of wines to enhance particular types of musical experience.)

The influence of German Romanticism in France is widespread. It spans the debates on dramatic theory and poetry of the 1820s and early 1830s to Delacroix and Baudelaire's formulations of aesthetic theory in the 1840s and 1850s.

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Chapter 13

Expression: Natural, Personal, Pictorial

Richard Shiff

Art and Expression among Individuals

"Once a beautiful thought has been struck with the mark of genius, there is also genius in refraining from giving it a new imprint": this, in 1824, is how the French academician A. C. Quatremère de Quincy praised the achievement of Raphael (Quatremère de Quincy, 1835, p. 241). With his assistants, Raphael had designed an *Expulsion from Paradise* by reiterating a figure composition invented by Masaccio nearly a century before. Although Masaccio's "mark of genius" brought material order to something immaterial ("a beautiful thought"), his visualization dictated neither a specific manner nor a medium. Subsequent masters could translate the realized image from one medium or format to another (say, from painting to drawing to painting), making any number of adjustments, so long as their technique attended to prevailing conventions, insuring intelligibility. Apparently, Raphael understood Masaccio's invention as an ideal, generalized type to be imitated wherever appropriate. Quatremère in turn believed that Raphael and his assistants had been able to repeat the essence of Masaccio's composition without degrading either it or themselves. Had Raphael stamped his *Expulsion from Paradise* with a radically distinctive character ("a new imprint"), he would have been challenging a classical perfection already attained. Acknowledging the value of his cultural inheritance, he revealed his genius not in revolution but restraint.

Yet, from our present perspective, it seems that a revolution was occurring, one that may have remained hidden to Raphael but surely not to Quatremère. With the rise of urbanism, bourgeois culture, and democratic systems of governance – developing at different rates in various centers throughout early modern Europe, from at least the sixteenth century forward – artistic practice became increasingly associated with autonomy and self-knowledge. Works of art were linked to the immediate conditions of their making and the personality of a unique maker, with achievement keyed to change and difference. In this sense

art was thought to document the experience of individuals (agents of bourgeois values) rather than the power of an aristocratic social order and its patronage. As a formative principle for art, individual expression emerged most clearly during the early nineteenth century, in debates in France that set tradition against modernity, Classicism against Romanticism.[1] Standard-bearing academicians like Quatremère countered arguments for a new aesthetic that was often allied with social reform.

Before individuality became such a concern, success in the practice of art derived from the masterful presentation of a theme, whether initiated by an artist or some other authoritative figure. A proper theme involved features subject to imitation and dissemination not only within a well-managed studio, but also within a tradition extending across generations (as in the lineage from Masaccio to Raphael, the artistic equivalent of an aristocracy). For this reason, theories of traditional, classical art emphasized its universality. Any idiosyncratic element, such as a quality of line or color specific to the style of a single artist and essentially inimitable, could be incorporated into a work of tradition only as an arbitrary supplement. Such an element might distract viewers more than enhance the intended message. It was therefore advantageous for an artist's style to converge upon existing work within the acknowledged tradition, causing authorship to seem collective. Indeed, this was how Quatremère viewed Raphael's lasting value.

Needless to say, Quatremère was a relatively conservative force, an anti-romantic whose historical effect would wane. His opponents argued that art could be appreciated properly only to the extent that its formal characteristics agreed with its viewers' specific predilections: as the audience for art changed, so did art's meaning; and even greatly admired works might fade into obsolescence. Modern artists could no longer expect viewers to acquire universal, timeless values from the monuments of the past. Instead, both artist and viewer would respond to a transient present. Art would be of its own time, perhaps exclusively so.

For artists to be individuals implied that certain of them would be more sensitive to line, others to color or luminosity. Such preferences might be deeply personal, triggered by physiological and psychological differences; but they might also reflect one's ethnicity, environment, or generation. Critics would need to adapt to the mentality and habits of an "ancient Greek to judge a Greek scene or to that of a modern to judge a contemporary one," as one writer argued in 1831 (Johannot, 1831, p. 110). In the extreme, individuals would be responding to individuals. In accord with this Romantic notion, the source of artistic value passed from the timeless, comprehensive *image* to the painter's immediate and particularized *mark*. Performing like an autograph signature, the mark, the artist's "touch," was – or was designed to be – intimately individual.

Conflicting attitudes toward artistic touch, as registered by J.-A.-D. Ingres and Eugène Delacroix, relate to this transfer of significance from generalized image to personalized mark (Quatremère praised Ingres, disapproved of Delacroix).[2]

Ingres believed that signs of a painter's manipulation of materials should recede from view, allowing art to rise above an individual's craft: "Touch should not be apparent. . . . Instead of the object represented [the image], it makes you see the painter's technique [the mark]; in the place of thought [image], it proclaims the hand [mark]" (Ingres, 1870, p. 150). To the contrary, Delacroix disparaged "cold exactitude," the use of an overly refined, virtually invisible technique that would frustrate whatever imaginative interest might derive from an artist's (as well as a viewer's) awareness of the material play of a medium (Delacroix, 1972, p. 556). The two advocates linked their temperamental and philosophical differences to factors of style and procedure: Ingres would suppress touch for the sake of conceptual clarity and control; Delacroix would liberate the mark to insure sensory variety and, in principle, the most direct response to whatever emotions his immediate experience sparked, even when the experience was imaginary or a memory.

During the early twentieth century, influential theories in philosophical aesthetics deepened the Romantic perspective by identifying personalized expression as the very foundation of art (see Croce, 1992; Dewey, 1934; Collingwood, 1938). Artistic creation was conceived as a process of discovering a proper form to "express" a particular emotion, intuition, or concept. Form itself would do more than merely transfer or translate – this, in contradistinction to what might have been said of Raphael and his assistants, that their form had transferred Masaccio's concept to a new site. Specific to a medium as much as to an emotion, artistic form in its modern conception had the force of origination; it actualized emotional or ideational content that otherwise attained no significant presence. Artistic expression thus entailed a reciprocity of medium and message: "There is no way of expressing the same feeling in two different media . . . the idea is had as an idea only in so far as it is expressed [in a medium or representational form]" (Collingwood, 1938, pp. 245, 249).

The definition of art as individually expressive form implied that any standardization of the medium would limit the visualization of thought and feeling. To regulate form was to regulate mind and spirit. During the nineteenth century, and even more during the twentieth, this notion presented a serious challenge to instruction within schools of art. Rigorous training in conventional technique was tempered by fears that as the master's controlling hand strengthened, the pupil's expressive originality weakened (see Shiff, 1998). At a time when universal education and a common literacy were being encouraged as features of social progress, artists were becoming antisocial; even when schooled, they received praise for keeping their distance from the crowd and from each other. "Sons of no one [who] do not exist in the plural": this, in 1846, was Théophile Thoré's appreciation of painters who found their expression in personal experience. His statement becomes a prescription for the Modernist future, yet he himself applied it to revered masters of the past, Raphael included (Thoré-Bürger, 1893, 1, pp. 288–90).

As a champion of modern democratic values, Thoré believed that self-regulation was the ultimate political good. Individuals manifested a beneficent

autonomy when they asserted their independence in socially responsible ways; the cultural contribution of an artist began with being "original," that is, true to a self and a personal vision. Any artist – and, by extension, any person – had the potential to accomplish acts of self-understanding. Yet, because social beings communicate only through inherited, shared languages (whether gestural, verbal, or pictorial), the means of representing unique identity remained elusive. Conventional techniques of rendering, difficult to circumvent, would mask an artist's individuality not only from others but from that very person. Indeed, a common strategy was to recuperate the past rather than reject it; radical Delacroix nevertheless emulated Raphael and other illustrious predecessors. Under such conditions, self-knowledge threatens to reduce to a set of commonplace beliefs, with an artist's visual manner representing no more than a superficial overlay, similar to a writer's unfortunate use of verbal cliché. Perhaps romantic individuality was destined to be as much of a myth as the classical truisms it attempted to displace.

When Delacroix, Thoré, and others focused on the material side of picture-making as the means to manifest singularity, they alluded to the difference between a workshop or industrial model of artistic practice and the Modernist paradigm of the creator in isolation. In the increasingly urban society, as industrialization came to dominate modes of consumption as well as modes of production, art (at least in the common imagination) became all the more a one-person, bohemian operation. Even those who promoted industry, standardized technologies, and regulated state institutions often turned to the mythologized individual-as-creator to provide an antidote to the ills modernity generated as its by-products. If culture was now caught between an outmoded aristocratic inheritance and the commodified objects of industrial and institutional production, then art, traditional bearer of cultural values, would paradoxically become the corresponding countercultural factor. The invention and mass marketing of photographic equipment contributed to this ironic inversion of roles: at the very moment when photography was providing common access to accurate, detailed reproduction of images (once the domain of classical art and its ally, printmaking), painters were discounting such mechanical reproducibility for the sake of manual techniques that created inimitable marks. As industry became progressively more organized and mechanized, art turned to spontaneous expressions of autonomy.

In terms of its politics, artistic creation arose from *responsible* autonomy because artists found their freedom or self-determination only within limits, experiencing restraint. This restraint was different from Raphael's: modern artists were limited not so much by a preconceived image as by the material conditions of their own work in progress. They enacted autonomy in their actual effort to create, which involved physical as much as cultural and psychological forces. To conceive of artistic production now became a matter of considering the interaction of three dynamic elements: a model (nature, things external, artistic precedents); an artist (thoughts, feelings, a psychology, an internalized ideology); a medium (a set of material capacities and resistances). By resolving the

tensions among these constituent forces – as if spontaneously, from inside the process itself – a work of art, successful in the modern sense, would demonstrate the principle of harmonious self-regulation.

Expression and its Mark

To extract the juice or sap of a plant: this is the physical sense of the verb *express*, suggesting that the expressive content of a work of art must be a reduction or essence drawn from a complex or diversified source. To express is to reveal, highlight, or concentrate something otherwise diffused or obscured within a comprehensive field of experience. The term connotes singularity and directness, as in "express" purpose, "express" delivery. Nevertheless, it often seems that expressive representation is figured and connotative, being implicitly opposed to the literal and denotative. To define art as expression is tantamount to claiming that no artistic representation (actually, no representation whatsoever) can be pure reference, pure resemblance, pure objectivity; furthermore, that any representation must express something more, or entirely other, than what seems given in its superficial appearance. This is a commonplace belief of the modern era, related to the notion that the meaning of a linguistic term can never be fixed or contained, that any word, phrase, or "expression" will convey a different content whenever the interpreter, context, or moment differs.[3] And yet, as I have stated, expression begins with the intention to be open and direct.

When expression takes precedence over mere representation, historians and critics resort to asking what, in fact, is being expressed. The answer is the triad of constitutive elements to which I have referred: a work of art expresses its model, its creator the artist, and the picture or work itself, that is, an act of picturing within a given medium (the "pictorial" factor). Boundaries between the three elements of expressive content are uncertain and endlessly negotiable.

(1) Art expresses its model. This might be a person posing in the artist's studio, a landscape viewed outdoors, or an imaginary scene derived from some past experience. It might also be an antecedent work, perhaps executed in the same medium, as when a painter copies or pastiches an admired painting. Even in the latter case perfect doubling does not occur: any representation will either lack some feature of its model, exaggerate it, or add a feature, becoming expressive of a certain differential or transformation as it creates something never before known. Artists tend to internalize a model through an act of representation, converting it into what can be regarded as a motif or pictorial theme. A motif itself can function as a model, a pattern of discovery that guides an artist's movement within a medium (in the way that a current can guide, as well as resist, a swimmer's direction).

(2) Art expresses the artist. Through its transformation of the model, art expresses the vision, the emotions, the very character of the artist. This factor

is emphasized in styles specifically labeled Expressionist or Expressionistic (those of Edvard Munch, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Willem de Kooning). An artist's manner of representing a model is analogous to an idiosyncratic gesture that reveals personality. By this reasoning, a painting of a model is always also a painting or representation of the person who makes the painting; it is of, as well as by, the artist. To follow are two nineteenth-century statements of this principle (both of which happen to address the issue of expression by using figured, metaphoric "expression"): "A portrait is a model complicated by an artist"; "a work of art is a personality, an individuality . . . a combination of a human being, the variable element [artist], and nature, the fixed element [model]" (Baudelaire, 1965, p. 81; Zola, 1970, pp. 59–60).

(3) Art expresses the "pictorial" – the emergent material and physical character of the very work the artist is creating. Any medium offers a certain resistance that must, to some extent, be overcome. So the artist works against, as well as with, the medium of representation (as if it were an internal model, a current for the swimmer, as opposed to the kind of external model commonly thought of as "subject matter"). The process of working with and against the medium, both a conflict and a collaboration, again expresses character: not only that of the artist, but also the material character of the work, *its* form and potential. At any historical moment, a medium or practice will seem to have a certain expressive, communicative range, to be known only as a result of artists having engaged that medium. The proof of a medium is in its practice and products.

How subjective, then, is this pictorial factor? Consider that artists who concentrate on pictorial relationships become ever more sensitive to the physical properties of painting. To draw a line or to color a shape seems to release a tension between what is seen (externally, as if objectively) and what is felt (internally, as if subjectively). A thing seen can be "felt" when drawn or painted in a way that gives it a desirable form, even if pleasing only to the individual artist. This might explain why the act of representation is such a satisfying exercise – it crosses the barrier between outside and inside, perceived sensation and sensed emotion. But a new and different kind of tension is generated by this same act. An artist becomes particularly aware that his or her hand moves within a bounded area (the drawing or painting surface), responding not only to the thing observed and its imagined aesthetic potential, but also to the restrictions imposed by the specific pictorial format. This second tension is "pictorial"; its spontaneous resolution conveys an expressiveness of its own, as subjective and open to interpretation as any other.

There is a fourth factor to consider, sometimes difficult to distinguish from the other three: art simply conveys, or expresses, expressiveness. In this respect, art is self-reflexive and perhaps, in a nineteenth-century sense, insincere. Although artists committed to being expressive struggle to be sincere (honest, direct), they do so by design, explicitly intending to communicate sincerity as a value. Through their professionalism, they distance themselves from any uncon-

trolled, "sincere" form of expression; they work to give the effect of an emotion perhaps never directly experienced. The problem was famously articulated by Denis Diderot in *The Paradox of Acting* (written 1769–78):

> At the very moment when [the actor] touches your heart he is listening to his own voice; his talent depends not, as you think, upon feeling, but upon rendering so exactly the outward signs of feeling, that you fall into the trap . . . he is not the person he represents. (Diderot, 1957, pp. 19–20)

Would artists be able to avoid trapping *themselves* as much as their audience, as they artificially induce their own emotion? Would they be able to bypass their own professional skills and conventions? Such was the aim of the modern art of individual expression.

To Picture Expression

The landscape painting of Camille Corot (1795–1875) was one of the first bodies of work over which nineteenth-century critics raised their full range of questions concerning expression. Because Corot's style appeared simple, straightforward, and lacking in many standard refinements, he became a candidate for the ideally naive painter whose expression escaped convention. In 1853 Charles Clément noted Corot's "clumsiness" and wondered whether it was "true" or "affected" (Clément, 1869, p. 338). If "true," expression would have been generated internally; and Corot's somewhat disjointed application of paint would indicate that neither premeditation nor self-censorship had channeled his vision and emotion. If "affected," the same expressive gesture would have derived from technical routines, the painter intending his "clumsy" marks to signal a degree of sensation and emotion he may never have actually felt. The issue is convoluted: adopting an apparently expressive manner, an artist could conceivably be naive in spirit and yet paint with no visible difference from another artist who was calculating. Children, one would think, present such a paradox during their natural acquisition of adult language; they learn expression by imitating, by acting out.

How was a critic to distinguish sincere from insincere expressiveness? The case of the seemingly naive Corot was complicated by the painter's external model, the natural landscape. Debates about what was truly "natural" and how to represent it dominated critical evaluation of French landscape painting early in the nineteenth century when numerous writers objected to imposing the control of conventions on nature's random order. Even with the most programmatic of landscape themes, a painting was considered improved when enlivened by details of naturalistic observation, nature's own idiosyncrasies. Such features became signs of the artist's direct engagement with the environment. To depict nature with unusual specificity was to enter into the aesthetics of personal

experience: pictorial description of a given site and moment evoked the presence of the artist-viewer in that place, at that time.

By attending to the immediate conditions of experience, the artist became a second "natural" factor in the process of creative representation. Accordingly, critics often elided the natural and the personal, as Paul Mantz did in 1847: "In landscape naively studied, without the preoccupation of [conventional] style, a highly poetic element . . . can slip in; this is the personality of the artist" (Mantz, 1847, p. 96). Mantz prefaced his observation by differentiating two types of landscapists. The first type approach their model naively, communing with the landscape because they love it so deeply, "see[ing] it as it is"; their mark constitutes or expresses nature as the natural. The second type apply a preconceived system to the landscape; they alter its physiognomy by painting it according to artistic precedent rather than immediate experience, exercising a regulated, conventional pictorialism (Mantz, 1847, pp. 94–5). When Mantz concluded that a "poetic" element, intimately associated with the personality of the artist, "can slip in," he was suggesting that the mark becomes as personal as it is natural whenever naive vision escapes the bounds of regulated practice.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, references to the personal (the second nature) were dominating criticism, with emphasis on the act of painting as a vehicle for independent expression. Under these circumstances, what role would the pictorial play? As the organizing force that gave character to the material elements, might the pictorial factor not conflict with the natural and the personal, in the way that Mantz opposed systematic, calculating painters to naive painters?

Not necessarily. Toward the century's close, it became possible to regard certain kinds of pictorialism as asserting the value of individual experience and of the related political goal of autonomous self-regulation: a picture might change unpredictably as the artist developed it, with the artist responding spontaneously to the emergent picture. Just as the personal could "slip into" the realm of the natural, so it could converge upon and harmonize with the pictorial, revealing an artist's aesthetic in its most material yet naive aspect. The expressiveness of painting would be independent of any theme or message conveyed by the totalized image, because expression would appear in the developing forms, the painter's marks. A social and political interest in the freedom of the individual is likely to have increased sensitivity to this kind of self-regulative pictorialism. In the twentieth century, critics such as Roger Fry and Clement Greenberg gave the name "Formalism" to this self-sustaining involvement with the pictorial. As they conceived it, Formalism shared most of the aesthetic practices that others associated with Expressionism (see Shiff, 1998). Hence, the curious case of American Abstract Expressionism, which some critics discussed as a logically derived technique for a new kind of pictorial structure, and others regarded as less of a coherent style, more of a spontaneous release of emotion. Just as naturalism (Realism, Impressionism) was the primary vehicle for personal expression

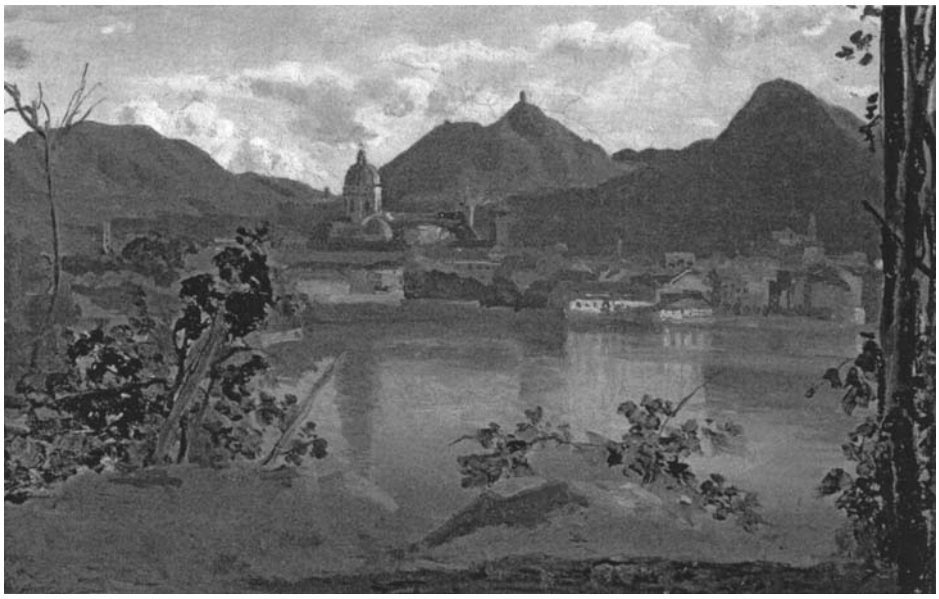


Plate 13.1 Camille Corot, *La Ville et le lac de Côme* (Lake Como and the Town), 1834. Private Collection

during the nineteenth century, so pictorialism (with its variant, Formalism) assumed this function during the twentieth century.

Would visual effects themselves be sufficient to distinguish among the natural, the personal, and the pictorial? (Here, as previously, we are investigating signification within a specific historical context, with effects being perceived in differential relation to other effects; no answer to our question will be absolute.) At least some distinction ought to appear between an image intended as natural and one conceived primarily as pictorial. On the natural side, consider Corot's study *Lake Como and the Town*, 1834 (plate 13.1); it was painted at the site in Italy, where the artist attempted to record images from immediate observation. Corot would recycle such naturalistic detail for many years as the foundation for large exhibition pictures that often assumed a fanciful mythological cast. Given the dreamlike context in which his trees and lakes eventually reappeared, his art was commonly described as poetic (in Mantz's sense) and impressionistic, meaning that it sacrificed objective detail to express a personalized vision – there were "leaves missing from trees . . . fissures left out of rocks" (Blanc, 1866, pp. 37–40). Even in his sometimes labored exhibition pictures Corot "reduced his technical procedure to its most elementary form and applied to his canvas only enough paint to say what he felt, as if he feared to hide his [poetic, expressive] thought under luxuriant execution" (Clément, 1864, p. 2). Such accounts would obviously also fit Corot's small, fresh studies like his view of Como, which were

reserved for studio use or for the private consumption of close friends and knowledgeable patrons. In the study, Corot's paint has a particularly fluid quality; this suggests that abbreviation or reduction was the result of speed of execution, contributing to a naturalistic effect, whether or not contrived. In exhibition paintings, the same factor of reduction would result from editing; a critic might view such reduction as calculated, but also as guided by the artist's imagination and intimate desires.

Despite the attention given to the impressionistic character of Corot's art, it usually revealed traditional features of compositional arrangement. Corot's nineteenth-century viewers (and we ourselves) recognize the familiar irony: a seemingly natural order, an impression "naively" rendered, may end up looking just as artificial and contrived as a composition openly devoted to following conventional pictorial rules. A viewer's response is likely to be divided. Although it is easy enough to imagine that Corot's free use of the brush during his day at Como was responding directly to the incidents of his vision, it becomes equally clear that he was working to arrange his represented objects as elements within the rectangle of his picture, perhaps thinking ahead to how a full-scale composition, destined for exhibition, would need to be organized. This is particularly evident where a right angle of darkness echoes the right and bottom framing edges of Corot's view of the scene. In terms of the representation, this configuration of darker values comes into being as a combination of a group of slender trees at the extreme right and what, along the bottom edge, may be either their cast shadow or an arbitrarily placed shading of uncertain "natural" cause. It seems that the painter used these dark elements to suggest that the central lakeside vista opens into brilliant light. This kind of pictorialism evokes a naturally picturesque beauty but can also be recognized as a variation on academic formulas for organizing nature into the "picturesque," a preconceived representational category.

It requires the comparative example of someone like Vincent van Gogh to see why Corot's art – so very composed and so effective pictorially – might still be perceived as following a natural rather than a pictorial order of expression. Van Gogh's procedure is not so much a matter of organizing the scenic elements of an image (such as trees and shadows), but rather of arranging and structuring contrasting patterns of marks. These marks constitute the represented objects but do not necessarily describe specific features of appearance; instead they divide the picture into compositional segments, likely to diverge from the order of material distinctions in nature.

In Van Gogh's *Landscape with Figures*, 1889 (plate 13.2), the direction and flow of the network of marks responds to the rectilinear framing edges of the canvas, respecting its actual dimensions as if there were little or no pretense that the scene in nature continues beyond the picture's physical limits. At the upper left corner, a wavelike pattern indicating the sky becomes less wavelike and more of a repetitious set of parallel strokes as it approaches the canvas edge; it seems to align with that edge as an actual barrier. This shift in the character of the marks



Plate 13.2 Vincent van Gogh, *Landscape with Figures*, 1889, oil on canvas, 49.9 × 65.5 cm. The Baltimore Museum of Art, The Cone Collection, BMA 1950.303

has no referent or motivation in an external scene or a preconceived design: its cause is neither an atmospheric effect in the observed sky nor a need to vary the structured decorative pattern. Establishing neither naturalistic illusion nor decorative order, Van Gogh's marks seem to record the artist's own bodily response to having reached a physical limit, the edge of the given material format. This effect appears as well in the sequence of heavily accented bars of color (yellows, earthy reds, greens) that meet the left edge of the second of the row of four receding trees; here, strokes of paint react to strokes of paint. Van Gogh's mark becomes pictorial in the sense that it recognizes the picture itself (its paint and canvas) as the authority to which a succession of acts of marking must be responsible, to which they must "respond" in a self-regulatory manner. Because the artist's pattern of marking hardly seems preconceived, it evokes in the viewer a sense of spontaneous expression.

For Greenberg in 1944, Van Gogh was one of a number of late nineteenth-century painters who realized the "importance of every physical factor" in a work of art; his "distortions" of the natural model were "determined just as much by the tensions between the frame of the picture and the forms within it as by expressive compulsions." With the phrase "expressive compulsions" Greenberg was referring to the personal factor in the communication of aesthetic and ethical

values, precisely what Corot's nineteenth-century critics had called "poetry." Greenberg recognized that Van Gogh's expressive power, at least to eyes of the twentieth century, depended on pictorialism – material marking – more than on a response to a model in nature. Van Gogh had asserted "the materialism of art" as a means of expressing his personal being (Greenberg, 1986–93, 1, p. 202).[4] Both forces, personal and pictorial, were being realized in their interaction.

This is the kind of pictorialism that serves the social values of autonomy and self-regulation. With expression by means of pictorialism, the self-generating pictorial motif (which can be abstract) dominates all external models, including those imposed by tradition. It acquires its own assertive movement in coordination with the (expressive) movements of the artist's hand, as that hand responds to the physicality of painters' materials. The work in progress motivates the artist to continue, as if he or she were following representational gestures as much as leading or conducting them. Expression derives from the picture itself as the artist creates it. Such pictorialism is antithetical to "classical" practice, in which the resultant image is detached from its own process of development, by the very fact of its timelessness and reiterative perfection.

During the era of modern art – still very much with us – artists have become increasingly conscious of distinctions between natural expression (signifying nature or some other model), personal expression (signifying the self), and pictorial expression (signifying a material process of creation). Whether working in modes of representation or pure abstraction, they have come to favor the pictorial as a path to the personal. Maurice Denis stressed the importance of "expression by means of the work itself [the marking, the developing motif] and not the represented subject [the model, the image]" (Denis, 1908, p. 279). Henri Matisse explained that his drawings were motivated by an idea understood only "as it grows with the picture" (Matisse, 1995, p. 132). Barnett Newman also referred to this reciprocity of expressiveness: "It is as I work that the work itself begins to have an effect on me. Just as I affect the canvas, so does the canvas affect me" (Newman, 1966, p. 26). Let Roy Lichtenstein, who produced representations of representations, have the final, extreme word: "Artists have never worked with the model – just with the painting" (Lichtenstein, 1963, p. 62).

Notes

All translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

1 The pattern of change associated with modernity has its complications: an aristocratic patron might commission public monuments and official portraits while simultaneously forming a private collection of drawings valued for their autographic intimacy; an open "democratic" art market might be dominated by an elite plutocracy, just as privileged as an aristocracy. Well beyond the Romantic era, personal expression remained identified with values of originality and individualism, which nevertheless could be accommodated to particularly modern forms of Classicism; see Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism* (University of Chicago Press,

1984), pp. 70–98, 175–184. Artists of the late twentieth century – Jasper Johns, Donald Judd, Gerhard Richter, Cindy Sherman – have often questioned, parodied, or denied the value and even the possibility of individual expression

2 Although Quatremère recognized the necessity of difference between reality and its representation as well as between one artist's representation and another's, he resisted promoting difference for its inherent expressiveness. See A. C. Quatremère de Quincy, *Essai sur la nature, le but et les moyens de l'imitation dans les beaux-arts* (*Essay on the Nature, the End and the Means of Imitation in the Fine Arts*) (Paris: Treuttel et Würtz, 1823), pp. 7–8, 13–14, 182; *Essai sur l'idéal dans ses applications pratiques aux oeuvres de l'imitation propre des arts du dessin* (*Essay on the Ideal in Its Practical Applications to Works of Imitation Proper to the Arts of Design*) (Paris: Le Clère, 1837), pp. 42–3.

3 Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man are among many who argue that communicative signs forever fail to establish unique origins and referents, that expression and representation are beset by indeterminacy (Jacques Derrida, "Signature event context" [1971], *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 307–30; Paul de Man, "Sign and symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*," *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (Summer 1982), 768–9).

4 Greenberg derived his analysis of postwar American art (Abstract Expressionism) from his understanding of what had happened to comparably responsive European art, such as Van Gogh's, in the wake of social changes wrought by the nineteenth-century industrial revolution: "The impressionists and those who came after them in France put themselves in accord with the situation by implicitly accepting its materialism – the fact, that is, that modern life can be radically confronted, understood and dealt with only in material terms" (Clement Greenberg, "The present prospects of American painting and sculpture," (1947) in John O'Brian, (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4 vols, University of Chicago Press, 1986–93, 2, p. 164).

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Chapter 14

Reading Artists' Words

Richard Hobbs

The reading of painters' or sculptors' words has become an increasingly common activity during the last 150 years. Books featuring artists' activities and achievements as writers have been consumed avidly by a public displaying an insatiable hunger for such words. This hunger is related to the function these words are commonly thought to serve: to be in a synergetic relationship with the visual works of artists, corresponding to them in a way that can reveal common patterns of meaning and so can propose reliable ideological and cultural grids through which we should see the visual works. Consequently, statements of theory made by artists, quotations from their letters, diaries, autobiographies and from their occasional experiments with established or even exploratory literary forms are to be found everywhere in art criticism and in art historical discourse. This chapter will show why there is also widespread distrust, notably within the French semiotic tradition, of the notion of a synergetic relationship between visual images and artists' words, on the grounds that the specificity of each medium separates them fundamentally. By this argument, the particularity of visual expression in a work of art can neither be reduced nor transferred into artists' writings, and the relationship between artists' images and words is correspondingly complex.

Michel Butor and the Presence of Words in Art

In general terms, visual works do, of course, take on meaning partly through our consciousness of words, as is often pointed out. In 1969 Michel Butor, then a celebrated proponent of the French New Novel, published *Les mots dans la peinture* [Words in Painting], a writer's reflections on the inevitability of the mediation of words in our experiences of visual images. Pure seeing, according to Butor, does not exist. Seeing a painting is always accompanied by awareness of the role that words play. We are inevitably made aware of the artists' names and hence their reputation, and also of pictures' titles as a supposed guide to

meaning, however treacherous. Extended reflections on the experience of looking at paintings are also rooted in the verbal, whether on the level of the critic's attempts to systematize and explain such experiences or in the discourses of art history. This is no less true when we encounter pictures that are apparently free of a narrative subject or figurative references, as in the abstraction of Kandinski or Mondrian.

Les mots dans la peinture attracted wide attention when it appeared, being recognized as a subversion of the idea of pure painting or abstract expression. Thirty years later, however, the debate has moved on. Butor's book, for all its merits, appears dated and even simplistic, more a symptom of cultural change of the recent past, expressing a shift in general awareness of visual culture, than an enduring exploration of theory. In 1969 the interdisciplinary study of the visual in relation to the verbal was an uncommon minority concern in colleges and universities. Today that interdisciplinarity has become itself a discipline, and one that is practised sytematically throughout academic institutions, sometimes within cultural studies and often under the banner of word and image studies. The dual thrust of Butor's arguments – a celebration of the power of words in our actual perception of a visual work of art combined with disingenuous surprise that Western cultural parameters do not acknowledge that power – has been overtaken by analyses of such phenomena that have led to a healthy distrust of categories such as pure painting or the transparency of words. Words, such as titles, that are an inevitable adjunct to the materiality of the work of art have lost their innocence, and with that some of their authority, being subjected to rigorous examination, whether through semiotics or other methodological rationales.

However, artists' words that constitute independent texts distant from specific visual works have kept much of their authority in an often unchallenged way. Monographs of artists, exhibition catalogues, and cultural histories all quote artists' writings as if they possess a special authenticity by virtue of coming directly from the artist's own realm of intentionality or creativity. Two causes lie perhaps behind this difference between suspicion of artists' words that are attached to the denotative and connotative powers of particular works and trust in those that function as independent texts. The first is the sheer familiarity of major texts by artists and their long-term presence in art history even before their increased prominence within modernism. From Alberti to Leonardo and Vasari, or from Reynolds to Constable and Delacroix, artists' writings have long been present, and as if naturally so, in the informed public's awareness of the activities of visual artists. Second, the publishing practice that surrounds artists' writings has tended to corroborate the assumption that these are uncomplicated and reliable texts rather than to investigate their complex status. With notable exceptions, genuinely critical editions are too seldom undertaken, and many distinguishing features of the varying types of artists' writings are regularly ignored as a whole or in part. Basic criteria are bypassed, such as whether texts were prepared for publication by the artists themselves or by another agency, or what the implications concerning meaning and interpretation might be of transposing

private writings by artists into the public domain, with or without their authors' cooperation or editorial skills.

If we choose to examine artists' writings more critically, we find that their identity and functions are in fact beset by problems. For example, how can we define them as a mode of expression? How, indeed, do we read them? Do they have common features that combine to give a distinct category of cultural activity or are they simply a confused jumble of various types of verbal creation? How do they relate to the visual creativity that is their author's main activity? Do we read them in the same way as any text that we encounter, or by assuming that a form of hybridity is at stake in which the artist's creativity becomes dual, verbal as well as visual? Would such hybridity demand an analogous hybridity of reading practice in which we shift the horizons of our expectation to a word and image dynamic? Are we right, above all, to give artists' writings special status and authority in attempts at exegesis of visual works of art?

Marcelin Pleynet and Irreducibility

A sceptical note was sounded on this whole subject at the time of Butor's *Les mots dans la peinture* by his compatriot Marcelin Pleynet, then a member of the structuralist *Tel Que*l group of writers and theorists. Around 1970, Pleynet wrote a series of essays (first published in 1971) on painters or groups of painters who had occupied a central place in Modernism – Matisse, Mondrian, the Bauhaus, the Russian avant-garde – which he later assembled in book form as *Système de la peinture* (1977), translated into English in 1984 under the title *Painting as System*. Pleynet understands by 'system' the ways in which works of art express or encapsulate attitudes and contradictions that situate each artist not simply as an individual but, more importantly, socially and ideologically. When Cézanne transgresses conventional codes of how to apply paint to canvas, that transgression has a significance that relates to broad social and institutional paradigms. Pleynet is insistent that this disruption lies in the intrinsic originality of the visual works themselves and is distinct from extrinsic factors such as artists' writings. This argument seems unsurprising when applied to Cézanne in that his letters, poems and transcribed conversations have never been considered as primary in his reputation. But this same argument becomes quite different in its weight when applied to an artist such as Kandinsky. Kandinsky enjoys exceptional status as a writer about art as well as a creator of art, most famously in his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1947, first published 1912). Pleynet points to what he sees as striking anachronisms in Kandinsky's writings whereby this leader of the Russian avant-garde espouses in them redundant and received ideas concerning the theosophical or metaphysical, having their source in nineteenth-century ideology. A consequence of this is that Kandinsky denies or suppresses in his writings some of his own originality as a visual artist, since his paintings, seen as system, usher in a very twentieth-century ideological break with a

nineteenth-century past. His writings, far from explaining the originality of his own art, tend to contradict or detract from that originality which is better observed in his paintings considered as a system in itself. Similarly, Pleynet claims that Matisse and Mondrian encapsulate unconsciously in their writings a conflict between, on the one hand, a mandate coming from the conventions of established art theory to seek to rationalize their practice and, on the other hand, an awareness that their art includes and perhaps celebrates the irrational and the contradictory. In other words, Pleynet's investigation of the notion of painting as system leads him to point out that artists' writings are quite likely to distract us from the business of understanding their paintings.

The interest of Marcelin Pleynet's *Painting as System* from the point of view of my investigation of artists' writings therefore lies in his demonstration of ways in which artists' writings do not meet with their practice. The verbal or theoretical determinations of artists' written accounts of what they are doing are different from the determinations of their practice, and as such have a questionable or problematic relation to it. The meaning of a complex visual artefact such as a painting or a body of paintings has to do with the structures and dynamics of what can be seen in the workings of the visual image itself, so that to invest artists' verbal articulation of the meanings of their work with a special authority or authenticity is often to bypass attention to what has actually been achieved. Pleynet reverses the authority that the verbal tends often to be given over the visual in the public reception of works of art. He combines a formalist distrust of attributing signifying status to elements coming from outside the work of art with a more structuralist approach that reveals a fundamental correlation between the form of works of art and their sociopolitical significance.

However, at a simpler and more general level, the richness of his approach can be attributed to a wider historical pattern that Pleynet himself does not acknowledge: his essays belong to a lineage in theory that insists on difference and even antagonism as an inevitable relationship between visual images and words, as opposed to direct equivalence, concord or harmonious interaction. This is a lineage that is often, rightly or wrongly, traced back some two hundred years to a classic eighteenth-century text on the topic: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laokoön, or on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766). Lessing's *Laokoön* has often been seen as the text that marks the end of the classical theory of *ut pictura poesis*, and the beginning of a modern consciousness of the essential difference between the arts, an awareness of the irreducibility of their differing media or forms. The Renaissance theory of *ut pictura poesis* (taking its cue from antiquity in Horace's apparent affirmation of the fundamental similarity between poetry and painting, or words and images) is bound up with classical images of the sister arts, in which the muses are united by their common mother, Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. The unity of the muses considered as sisters sanctions assumptions such as the adage attributed to Simonides: 'Painting is silent poetry, and poetry speaking painting'. The verbal and visual arts are,

by this argumentation, united by the aim to produce the same effect, albeit it by differing means.

Intractable difficulties surround interpretation of the theory of *ut pictura poesis* and Lessing's supposed denial of it. There is much that is debatable about both the ancestry or history of the theory of *ut picture poesis* and the exact relations between medium and effect that it can be thought to embody. As regards Lessing, modern apologists of *Laokoön* have claimed that it is less a denial of *ut pictura poesis* than a corrective to misleading ideas about the relation between words and images once associated with it, and therefore a modern redefinition of older theory rather than a dismissal of it. But these intractable difficulties by no means diminish the weight of Lessing's remarks. Even if he does not deny in his *Laokoön* that words and images are indeed united by their common mimetic objectives as arts of imitation, he relocates the debate in a clarification of their differences as media in terms of codes of signs. For example, he writes in an early draft of his *Laokoön*: 'Painting uses colours and figures in space. Poetry articulates tones in time. The signs of the former are natural. Those of the latter are arbitrary.'

Such thoughts imply an autonomy of medium that would be prominent in nineteenth-century permutations of the theory of Art for Art's Sake. Lessing is also adumbrating a taxonomy of signs more usually associated with the semiotics of Peirce or Saussure and their followers, a recognition of the essential point that different sign systems operate within different cultural and denotative conventions. Lessing's importance for us today is perhaps to have anchored comparisons between the arts in terms of their medium, of their concord or discord at a semiotic level. Marcelin Pleynet, fully conversant with sign theory and semiotic analysis, pushes such a method to an extreme point in showing how artists' writings are more likely to be different from their visual practice or even antagonistic to it than to enjoy some sort of simple equivalence to it.

Paul Gauguin as Case Study

To investigate this argument further, we need to extend it into actual examples of artists' writings, testing theory against practice. To do so globally would involve a vast range of historical and cultural references, attempting to include so many focal points that none would finally be clear. For this reason, I shall limit my detailed enquiry here to one exemplary case study that has much wider implications: Paul Gauguin (1848–1903). Why Gauguin? First, he was an exceptionally prolific and inventive writer, producing a wide variety of texts of undisputed quality. Second, he exemplifies many general problems of artists' writings by virtue of being the assimilator and recipient of many nineteenth-century assumptions about the arts and also the creator of new artistic paradigms of the twentieth century. It was to Gauguin that Michel Butor turned in 1999 in three

public lectures, based on the painting *D'où venons-nous, que sommes-nous, où allons-nous?* (1897–8), that reflect on the cultural significance of books: *Quant au livre. Triptyque en l'honneur de Gauguin* (Butor, 2000). Gauguin's writings, as well as his paintings and sculpture, place him at the centre of discussions of modernity and Modernism.

In the first place, Gauguin experiments strikingly with the function of titles. In his later Polynesian works he increasingly makes titles a prominent part of the picture surface and frequently uses words that are apparently, albeit with dubious authenticity, Polynesian: 'Te Nave Nave Fenua', 'Pape Moe', 'Vahine no te miti' and so on. This brings us back to Michel Butor's arguments in *Les mots dans la peinture* about the interference or intercession of words in our perception of an individual work of art. We read these words as part of the process of viewing the painting. Ostensibly, they are a summary of the painting or a commentary upon it. But in comparison with many of Gauguin's earlier titles, these late Polynesian ones are peculiarly opaque, in that they usher us into a realm of meaning that is difficult to decipher and remains mysterious. They tend to suggest the ineffable rather than name what is definite. In literary theory, Gérard Genette has investigated what he calls metatextuality, the unfailing mechanism whereby texts comment upon themselves in a self-referential manner. Titles of paintings may be said generally to operate in a metatextual manner, but in Gauguin's late work, any comment by words on the painting of which they seem part is problematic. In this domain, already, Gauguin is clearly a consummate experimenter in how painters can use words, concentrating not on a definite convergence of visual images and linguistic signs, but on the suggestive force of their divergence.

Turning to his more general writings, we find a different form of evidence of his versatility in using words. Gauguin wrote throughout the last twenty years of his life, from the time he embarked on his public career as a painter, in a way that shows extraordinary diversity concerning genre. By genre, I mean not simply kinds of writing, but the rhetorical strategies and conventions that make up those kinds of expression. Already in 1884–5, he published journalism and articles, subsequently brought together as *Notes synthétiques*. He returned to this type of writing in the early 1890s, contributing to Symbolist periodicals with Aurier and Emile Bernard. This was the time of his first Polynesian journey. His sojourn in Tahiti produced three principal texts: the *Cahier pour Aline* (1892–3, published 1984), an amalgam of notes and borrowings addressed to his daughter, the *Ancien culte mahorie* (1893–4, published 1951), studying and representing lost Polynesian mythologies, and *Noa Noa* (1893–7), a complex development of these two to which I shall return below. Later additions were made to the *Noa Noa* manuscript, now referred to as *Diverses choses*. In such miscellaneous writings we find *L'Eglise catholique et les temps modernes*, at first sight an anticlerical polemic but to be developed by Gauguin as a critique of modern culture and beliefs, embracing a form of syncretism. During his second and final sojourn in Polynesia, he penned a volume of criticism, or rather a caustic riposte to Parisian critics: *Racontars de rapin* (1898–1902, published 1951). He also returned to journalism, but

this time a perverse form of colonial journalism, in his newspapers *Le sourire* (1899–1900) and *Les guêpes* (1899–1901). Finally he produced perhaps his most accomplished text, the book *Avant et après* (1903, published 1923), quite erroneously translated into English as *Intimate Journals*, since the text is far from being a diary or a confessional work, being a narrative that contrasts the civilized with the so-called primitive, thereby undermining both categories, through an array of binary opposites and dualities worthy of Baudelaire. In addition to these carefully grafted texts we have, throughout these years, Gauguin's letters to family, friends and collaborators. Like other fine correspondences, such as that of Flaubert, these letters are not simply private missives, since they contain statements and declarations that seem to imply a more general readership.

Before considering the pattern that emerges from this masterly generic variety, we need to look more closely at *Noa Noa*, Gauguin's most celebrated text. Gauguin spent ten of the last twelve years of his life in Polynesia, initially in Tahiti, eventually in the Marquesas Islands. His desertion of Europe was broken by only a two-year stay in France, from 1893 until 1895. When he returned temporally to Paris in 1893, he was concerned with publicizing his Tahitian paintings, hoping to sell his recent pictures at strong prices, despite their unfamiliar and exotic subject matter, ensuring their reputation in the avant-garde and the art market. An obvious first step was an exhibition, which he duly organized with Durand-Ruel. In addition he quickly decided to write a book that would be a narrative of his Tahitian experiences. When published, it would serve to explain his new art to the public and to collectors. It would therefore be an elucidating verbal counterpart to his paintings and all the more effective for being his own account. This project resulted in *Noa Noa*. From the beginning, however, the project was not so simple. First, Gauguin sought to collaborate in his venture with an established writer who was also an art critic sympathetic to his cause, Charles Morice.

Morice had published a leading volume of Symbolist literary theory in 1889, *La littérature de tout à l'heure* [The Literature of Tomorrow], and was considered at the time a leading poet, critic and theorist. The agreed project was that Morice would polish and improve Gauguin's draft text and add poems of his own to enhance the literary stature of the volume. Morice's contacts with publishing houses were also expected to ease speedy publication of the volume. In the event, publication of extracts did not take place until 1897 (in *La revue blanche*) and of the text as a volume not until 1901. Morice's role in this delay came to be perceived as a part of his more general failure to bring the project to effective fulfilment, as his contributions to the text were seen as too much at odds with those of Gauguin. To see Morice simply as blameworthy is, however, to ignore the fact that Gauguin himself decided to involve in his endeavour the field or forum of literary practice and in collaboration with a professional writer, leading to a highly original but perhaps flawed project. In addition to this, we can consider too Gauguin's clear intention to illustrate *Noa Noa* with woodcuts, making it in one sense an artist's book, an intention also unfulfilled. In other

words we have an uneasy mix or a conflict not simply between the activities of Gauguin and Morice as individuals but between the different artistic conventions and cultural or socioeconomic fields to which they belonged. As a strange but direct consequence, *Noa Noa* is a book that has no definitive text and cannot be given one, despite its importance and fame. It exists in two flawed versions: Gauguin's original draft which he never brought to a published form, now considered authentic, and the collaborative version with Morice.

Such an uneasy mix of literary convention with nonliterary experiment stands out also in the generic diversity of Gauguin's other texts. *Avant et après* begins with the words 'Ceci n'est pas un livre' [This is not a book] and proceeds to distance his work from the fictions of George Sand or Zola and from the confessional literature of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Gauguin explains 'je ne suis pas du métier' (it is not my trade). And yet the narrative strategies and techniques do belong to the trade of literature in that they are clearly related to literary conventions. In other words, Gauguin opens his text with a generic disclaimer that is in fact an invitation to us to read the words in a generically hybrid manner, alert to the functioning of its linguistic register and persuasive powers, but situating these powers outside the profession of literature and in the domain of the painter. It is not going too far to say that Gauguin plays with generic difference in order to manipulate his readers into acceptance of a false premise: that they are not reading a book as such. It is a book, but a book that pretends not to be one.

Gauguin, the Painter's Text, and Genre

To revert to Marcelin Pleynet and notions of semiotic distance between the domains of verbal and visual expression, Gauguin is exploiting that difference between the domains of painting and literature in order to establish a new category: a text that is appropriate to his dual identity as 'peintre-écrivain'. He is doing this not, as the origin of the *Noa Noa* project implies, in order to produce an equivalent in words of his art but in order to create something more original: a text that is *sui generis* a painter's text. Behind the disingenuousness of 'Ceci n'est pas un livre' lies a sophisticated self-consciousness in the manipulation of generic categories and qualities. This is a feature that pervades Gauguin's writings, elaborating a generic hybridity that partakes of the domains of painting and literature while belonging to neither. In his draft text for *Noa Noa*, purged of Morice's additions, he plays in a truly Modernist way on the coexistence of the autobiographical and the fictional, on self-disclosure and self-mythification, on the intertextual and on ekphrasis, exploiting various diegetic stratagems that a first-person narration offers. At one level, *Noa Noa* (meaning 'very fragrant') is the narration of an exotic quest to a distant island, a topos long familiar throughout travel literature and transposed into the novel by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul and Virginie* or Pierre Loti's *Le mariage de Loti*, and renewed through illus-

trated journals of Gauguin's day, notably *Le tour du monde* in which Polynesia featured regularly. On another level, *Noa Noa* is an implicitly ironic pastiche of such a tradition, as in the concluding coda section entitled 'The truth – the foul truth', in which he undercuts the exoticism of what has preceded with a brief description of the banalities and discomforts of life in a French colony.

The more we read Gauguin's words, the more we become aware of this skilful and self-conscious manipulation of verbal strategies, leading us into a distinct form of expression, an artist's text. We should not be surprised at Gauguin's verbal sophistication, as he had been a member of Mallarmé's circle in Symbolist Paris, and was steeped in Baudelaire. Nor should the stress upon generic self-consciousness surprise us, as this is altogether of the time. Although we today might associate self-consciousness about literary genres with innovations in theory from Roman Jakobsen to Gérard Genette, debates about literary genres or rhetoric are sempiternal. In Gauguin's time, Ferdinand Brunetière notably modernised genre theory in a series of lectures (1889) which sought to give a Darwinian basis to the coexistence and interaction of genres, later published as *L'evolution des genres*. Even Gauguin's correspondence can be placed in this pattern of self-consciousness concerning genres, in that his letters, as indicated above, frequently adopt the tone and stratagems of public pronouncement, with attendant and appropriate modes of expression, as opposed to private spontaneity.

Gauguin's texts serve well as an exemplar of artists' writings because they operate with such fluid versatility and inventiveness at the interface between what Marcelin Pleynet called the system of his visual works and an exploitation of the literary possibilities offered by verbal signs. His texts are not a direct equivalent of his paintings or a simple explanation of them. They enter a separate field of signification in exploiting literary genres, while retaining links with the vocation and the practice of the visual artist. They need to be read with this kind of duality in mind. They achieve a distinctive form of expression in terms of hybridity. This involves shifting patterns of innovation or anachronism, of adherence to established conventions and transgression of them. Gauguin's writings therefore enjoy autonomous identity and they do not exist as a mere adjunct of his art.

Conclusions

Although the single case study of Gauguin cannot, of course, stand as representative of all artists' writings, it does raise central questions as to how we can approach them. Reading Gauguin's words leads us inevitably to reflect more generally on how we read artists' words as well as why we read them. It reminds us that we as readers need to be aware of the pragmatics of these texts, in other words of their varying origins in private reflection or public pronouncement, and of the vicissitudes surrounding their publication and reception. It reminds us too that we as readers need to be fully aware of the generic conventions used in

writing such texts, and that we need to be aware at the same time of the fact that these conventions are transgressed, displaced or relocated through their relationship with a separate domain, which is the 'métier' of the artist. Last, but not least, it invites us to see this relationship between two domains in terms not of transparent equivalence but of dynamic interplay or even a productive antagonism.

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Chapter 15

Nietzsche and the Artist

Michael White

> Art and nothing but art! It is the great means of making life possible, the great seduction to life, the great stimulant of life.
>
> *Nietzsche*, The Will to Power

In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche gave a neat description of his view of man as the unification of the two poles of *creature* and *creator* (Nietzsche, 1973, p. 155). This complemented the twin tendencies of his writings to emphasize, on the one hand, the instinctual, natural side of the human animal forced to survive in a cruel and meaningless world and, on the other hand, to give overwhelming value to the artistic side of man as that which could forge meaning out of such a chaotic experience. Nietzsche's originality was to see these poles, *creature* and *creator*, as intertwined with one another rather than in opposition. While he inherited from the German Romantic tradition the attitude that great art offers a moment of insight into existence, he forcefully rejected any notion that this insight could be a release from life, or a transcendental intuition. He laid emphasis instead on creative existence and saw the artist as the antidote to the ascetic ideal of religion and metaphysics.

It is clear that certain Modernist tendencies, notably German Expressionism, derived their emphasis on immediacy and superabundance of vitality from Nietzsche's highly charged vocabulary, examples of which will discussed below. This has led to the popular conception of the Nietzschean artist as a natural force answerable only to himself, a figure of physical power and spontaneous energy. Beyond the bombastic image of artist as superman, however, there is real subtlety in Nietzsche's account of creative activity which engages with aesthetic theories reaching back to Plato and Aristotle. He has also had a profound influence on later thinkers, such as Freud, Heidegger and Derrida. For in his description of the artist Nietzsche managed to combine two elements which are at first glance incompatible: a physiological account of the creative body and a concept of art as that which gives meaning to existence. If the making of art is seen as a matter of physiology and the by-product of the nervous system or some other

corporeal process, how can it create value out of itself or determine the standards by which we can live our lives? The answer will be found in the distance Nietzsche has from any mechanistic or biologically deterministic notion of physiology. The physical is for him always something already psychological and typified in the activity of the artist.

Dionysian and Apollonian

To turn to Nietzsche's first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy* of 1872, its very first sentence introduces two dispositions necessary for the possibility of art, the Dionysian and the Apollonian (Nietzsche, 1967a, §1, p. 33). These, Nietzsche emphasized, were to be found in the bodily states of *intoxication* and *dream* respectively. The achievement of Greek tragedy was to have placed the two attitudes in a correct relation. As can be seen already, however, the states he described quickly exceed the purely physical. Dionysian intoxication experienced as an overflowing of sensuous energy is accompanied by an increased feeling of power and connection to others. In turn, the Apollonian dream, which places the body in calm repose, is attended by beautiful illusions in the consciousness of whoever gives himself over to it. Given that Nietzsche's subject here was ostensibly the hybrid art of tragic drama, the two tendencies incline towards music on the one hand and visual imagery on the other. The Dionysian is manifested in dance and movement, the Apollonian in image making. Total involvement is complemented by distance and contemplation.

This interpretation of classical civilization offered in *The Birth of Tragedy* was a radical challenge to that which prevailed in Goethe or Winckelmann's Germany a century earlier. Nietzsche's *rediscovery* of the Dionysian presented pre-Socratic Greece as having had a healthy attitude towards instinctual forces and its art emerging from an excess of energy which he later compared to the orgy and the mysteries of sexuality (Nietzsche, 1968b, p. 109). However, the description of the Apollonian as the enjoyment of the contemplation of illusion was also a departure from the values of order and rationality normally associated with classical antiquity. But, having described its birth, Nietzsche proceeded to describe the demise of tragedy which he saw in the plays of Euripides. In the latter's 'aesthetic Socratism', as he described it, Nietzsche witnessed the Apollonian corrupted into 'cool thoughts' and overtaken by reasoned argument. When the Apollonian dream state is lost, access to the Dionysian is also blocked:

> *Philosophical thought* overgrows art and compels it to cling close to the trunk of dialectic. The *Apollonian* tendency has withdrawn into the cocoon of logical schematism; just as in the case of Euripides we noticed something analogous, as well as the transformation of the *Dionysian* into naturalistic effect. Socrates, the dialectical hero of the Platonic drama, reminds us of the kindred nature of the Euripidean hero who must defend his actions with arguments and counterarguments and in the process often risks the loss of our tragic pity. (Nietzsche, 1967a, §14, p. 91)

To summarize then, in tragedy Nietzsche saw the two forces of the Apollonian and the Dionysian working in combination. Where the Dionysian reached down into the chaotic forces of nature which were both exhilarating and terrifying, the Apollonian rapturous vision provided the bearable, indeed beautiful form, through which this chaos could find expression. He thus speaks of 'symbolization of Dionysian wisdom through Apollonian artifices' (1967a, §22, p. 131).

In his view of tragedy Nietzsche also contested Aristotle's celebrated theory of catharsis which placed great emphasis on plot and above all on *praxis* (action), going as far as to define tragedy as 'the imitation of an action'. The audience was purged of dangerous emotions by comprehending intellectually the reversals in the tragic narrative. Nietzsche placed music above plot and saw *pathos* (emotional identification) rather than *praxis* as the prime vehicle of tragedy. Rather than a release from emotion, tragedy for Nietzsche heightens feeling and affirms life even in its most terrifying form. At the same time, his description of the Dionysian and Apollonian as physiological states led him to correlate the creative process, the artistic product, and their effect (see Silk and Stern, 1981, p. 234). Nietzsche was interested less in the logic of the storyline than in the origins of the artistic impulse; the successful tragedy, as a model of the successful work of art in general, is one which finds its way back to life itself. Where initially the Dionysian needed to be perceived through the veil of the Apollonian, the total effect of tragedy, as Nietzsche describes it, is to destroy this artifice and have 'Apollo [speak] finally the language of Dionysus'. The experience of the receptive audience is precisely the same as that of the tragic poet, a collective ecstasy which is felt as an increase in bodily vigour:

> All art exercises the power of suggestion over the muscles and senses, which in the artistic temperament are originally active: it always speaks only to artists – it speaks to this kind of a subtle flexibility of the body [. . .] All art works tonically, increases strength, inflames desire [. . .] even today one still hears with one's muscles, one even reads with one's muscles. (Nietzsche, 1968a, [809], pp. 427–8)

The move back to the experience of the artist not only placed the greatest value on the origin of the artistic impulse but also marked a break, as Nietzsche saw it, with the tradition of aesthetics which emphasized distanced contemplation and privileged the role of the spectator. Nietzsche imagined himself writing counter to the Kantian tradition although his reading of Kant himself appears to have been partial and much of it derived at second hand. One text that he read in depth though was Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* of 1819. This book set the agenda for Nietzsche's first writings but his eventual conclusion that aesthetic judgement can only be made from the perspective of maximum interestedness, from the point of view of the artist, contradicted Schopenhauer's position.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche directly acknowledged the correspondence of the Dionysian and Apollonian to Schopenhauer's distinction between Will and

Representation. By the first term Schopenhauer described the nature of the world as blind energy, by the second the availability of the world to human perception (see Schopenhauer, 1969). Forced to live in the world of Representation, a realm of mere appearance, the objects we can perceive are merely a veil cast over the Will. Nietzsche's reading of Schopenhauer focused on the two moments the latter described when the Will was most manifest to human consciousness. The first is the experience we have of our own bodies. As the object of our own will, the body is the site where we experience the conflict between our willing and the Will as the endless need to satisfy desires, the frustration of which causes anguish and pain. The second, and most significant for Schopenhauer, is to be found in aesthetic experience, notably that of music which he held to be an immediate copy of the Will. Schopenhauer distinguished these two moments from each other; bodily experience was still bound up in the world of individuated appearances whereas aesthetic contemplation could approach 'pure perception', where the subject was temporarily released from personal identity and made one with the Will. This echoes in Nietzsche's twice repeated statement in *The Birth of Tragedy* that it is 'only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*' (Nietzsche, 1967a, §5 & §24, pp. 52, 141). It is clear, however, that Nietzsche's conception of *justification* was distinct from anything to be found in Schopenhauer. In the same manner in which he came to reject catharsis, Nietzsche saw art not as the satisfaction or discharge of drives but as their heightening. The emphasis he gave to the physiological aspects of the Dionysian and the Apollonian was also an attempt to put together the division made by Schopenhauer between the types of knowledge gained through embodiment and aesthetic experience. The retention of a dualistic structure, however, would remain the major theoretical weakness of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

The Will to Power

While the Dionysian had obvious connections to vital instincts, the origin of its partner the Apollonian was hard for Nietzsche to explain outside of a traditional opposition of essence and existence, form and appearance. Even if the Apollonian was considered secondary, the trace of its metaphysical underpinnings was too strong. In his subsequent writings, therefore, Nietzsche subsumed Apollonian dreaming into the Dionysian state of intoxication and set both in opposition to the decadence he associated with religious morality and metaphysics. To do this involved transforming the relation of the two terms from a metaphysical scheme to a psychological one, central to which was the concept of sublimation. Dionysus and Apollo were no longer qualitatively distinct but the expression of one basic drive at different levels, a drive to which he would finally give the name 'will to power'. In another transcription of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche adapted the objectification of the Will through art to an account of the artist (rather than the contemplation of the artwork) as the conduit for the will to power and its

sublimation into creative activity. In the notes posthumously collected to form the book *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche frequently equates intoxication as the art-creating state with sexuality and suggests that 'art reminds us of states of animal vigour'. In an association not untypical for the nineteenth century, he directly compared creativity with sexual potency and went as far as to correlate 'the creative instinct of the artist and the distribution of semen in his blood' (Nietzsche, 1968a, [805], p. 424). As mentioned in the introduction, statements such as this have been taken as the source for our image of the Nietzschean artist as the incarnation of a virile force of nature.

It is this aspect of Nietzsche's writing about art and the artist that has the most obvious correlation with the attempts by German artists to renew or regenerate the visual arts in the early twentieth century. The artists of *Die Brücke* (The Bridge), the group founded in Dresden in 1905, were convinced that art had its roots in vital instincts rather than the intellect. The 'Programme of *Die Brücke*' calls simply for the rendering of the creative drive directly. It also states the desire 'to free our lives and limbs from the long-established older powers'.[1] This latter demand for the emancipation of the body can be found realized in the erotic content of much early *Die Brücke* painting. Certain commentators have found the hallmark of *Die Brücke* to be the 'celebration of sex through art' or even, following a principle of sublimation, 'the transposition of instinctual urges into socially acceptable art' (Gordon, 1987, p. 14). Sublimation in this context must be understood, therefore, not (as it would be later developed by Freud) as the release of tension but as an opening to sources of pleasure otherwise denied and a gain in sexual excitement. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner described his pictures as being 'created with blood and nerves' and in his diaries repeatedly referred to a state of ecstasy as the primary condition of his art permitting direct sensuous communication.[2] In *The Will to Power* Nietzsche notes that the effect of works of art 'is to *excite the state that creates art* – intoxication' (Nietzsche, 1968a, [821], p. 434). While the principle of sublimation suggests the transformation of the original drive, Nietzsche is clear that it can lead us back to the source of the stimulus. Thus Kirchner's pictures of lovers or other Expressionist images of ecstatic dancers do not tame the Dionysian but are intended to expose us to it by making us respond as artists, that is at a direct emotional level.

Intoxication and pleasure are one and the same thing in this scheme and, as already mentioned, art should encourage bodily vigour. Yet Nietzsche devoted considerable attention in his writing to the ugly, the painful and the horrific. Tragedy, it must be remembered, was for him life-enhancing and an intensification of feeling. Pleasure is therefore not an end in itself, but a by-product of the more general conflict of forces which Nietzsche understood as the will to power. Pleasure does not exclude pain because the will to power, by its nature, seeks resistance and obstacles to overcome. The activity of the artist can transfigure ugliness and lead to pleasure felt as an increase in power. Yet it is important to note that the will to power is distinct from any purpose or intention on the part of the artist. The state of intoxication is experienced as one

of being taken over, swept along with something beyond ourselves so that it might become 'the high point of communication and transmission between living creatures' (Nietzsche, 1968a, [809], p. 428). The work of art itself is hardly mentioned by Nietzsche. What is constantly affirmed is the art-creating state which is as significant for the creator as the observer. This tendency finds literal interpretation not only in Expressionism but in later twentieth-century artistic phenomena such as performance art. Hermann Nitsch's *Orgies Mysteries Theatre* begun in Vienna in 1962 uses ritualized pain as a medium for collective experience. His contemporary and fellow Austrian, Arnulf Rainer recreates the gestures of the insane, effectively turning the artist's body into the artwork (see Goldberg, 1988, pp. 163–7).

Although the Dionysian came to dominate Nietzsche's later thinking, he still found place for the Apollonian within the realm of intoxication as an 'intoxication of the eye'. In *The Birth of Tragedy* this visionary disposition is described in terms of dreaming; it is deep enjoyment of contemplation but accompanied by the sensation that what is engaged with is merely semblance. However, although illusionary, Apollonian vision was 'at the same time the symbolical analogue of the soothsaying faculty and of the arts generally, which make life possible and worth living' (Nietzsche, 1967a, §1, p. 35). Moving on from the notion of the world's *justification* as an aesthetic phenomenon, some of Nietzsche's most intriguing statements regarding the necessity of deception for life come in his 1882 book *The Gay Science*. Already figured in the title is a form of knowledge opposed to the empirical. Yet if this was to be science from the point of view of the artist, it would also be the realization that 'delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge' (Nietzsche, 1974, [107], p. 163). Art is not only a 'cult of the untrue' but is what ensures that 'as an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still *bearable* for us' (Nietzsche, 1974, [107], p. 163). Nietzsche's remorseless attack on dualisms aligned truth and error along a single continuum whereby the falseness of a judgement would not necessarily be an objection to it, if it is still life-enhancing or even life-preserving: 'We possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*', reads one of the most celebrated maxims in *The Will to Power* (Nietzsche, 1968a, [822], p. 435). Similarly, the celebration of falsehood must not be understood as escapism:

> Is art a consequence of *dissatisfaction with reality*? Or an expression of *gratitude for happiness enjoyed*? In the former case, *romanticism*; in the latter, aureole and dithyramb (in short, art of apotheosis): Raphael, too, belongs here; he merely had the falsity to deify what looked like the Christian interpretation of the world. (Nietzsche, 1968a, [845], p. 445)

The equation here of Raphael with the dithyramb, classicizing Renaissance painting with the ecstatic hymn to Dionysus, shows just how far Nietzsche went to intertwine the Apollonian with its counterpart and prevent them from hard-

ening into a dichotomy. His rejection of romanticism should also be duly noted, which by this time he associated with asceticism. Apollonian rapture will still contain the sexuality and voluptuousness better associated with the Dionysian but now transposed into 'calm, simplification, abbreviation, concentration' (Nietzsche, 1968a, [799], p. 420). Nietzsche's physiology of art in fact goes as far as to connect the *physical* and the *logical* to affirm the bodily pleasure taken in the orderly whereby 'logical and geometrical simplification is a consequence of enhancement of strength' (Nietzsche, 1968a, [800], p. 420). To restate the point, the sublimation of the will to power into art did not, for Nietzsche, have to result in just one type of product. His continued emphasis on the creative state and the experience of the artist left him open to varied forms of expression some of which might seem surprising to the contemporary reader.

If Dionysian intoxication as direct sensuous communication seems to provide the key element for expressionist aesthetics, the Apollonian can still be found in its accompanying tendency towards stylization and abstraction. Nietzsche accorded significant praise to the ability of an artist to impose style, connecting it to the embodiment of power and even the attainment of self-control.[3] It is the process of compelling the world to take on a particular shape which is the ultimate indication of the will to power in action. When he discussed art in its essential and definitive sense, Nietzsche used the phrase 'the grand style' which is to be found in the ability to 'compel one's chaos to become form: to become logical, simple, unambiguous, mathematics, *law*' (Nietzsche, 1968a, [842], p. 444). If this sounds like a manifesto for a rigid Neoclassicism then it must be recalled how far Nietzsche had already gone in redefining the basis of ancient Greek civilization. The Apollonian love of form has no privileged connection to the truth but is in fact its glorious renunciation:

> Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial – *out of profundity*. (Nietzsche, 1974, preface to the second edition, p. 38)

As a writer Nietzsche was himself a great stylist and in his autobiographical text *Ecce Homo* he went as far as to proclaim that he possessed 'the most manifold art of style any man has had at his disposal' (Nietzsche, 1979, p. 74). Such stylistic plurality was a means of achieving a nonsystematic, nondiscursive type of philosophizing but it risked the charge of decadence. His persistent references to 'the grand style' take place against the background of late nineteenth-century eclecticism which he judged to be an indication of physical decline. Style served Nietzsche not to be good in and of itself but 'to *communicate* a state, an inner tension of pathos through signs' (Nietzsche, 1979, p. 74). Once again the physiological is not far away as, even in writing, Nietzsche saw style as connected to rhythm, tempo, gesture and in fact a whole notion of bodily comportment.[4] The

artist, through whose body the will to power is manifested, is contrasted by Nietzsche to the hysteric whom he saw as 'will-less', and whose inability to communicate he saw as an indication of degeneration.

Expressionism inherited Nietzsche's obsession with style and his judgement that the nineteenth century had been an era of cultural decay (Gordon, 1987, p. 10). It can be seen in such documents as the *Blaue Reiter Almanach* (Blue Rider Almanac) of 1912 edited by Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky. The multitude of illustrations in this book, drawn not only from the Western tradition but also from non-European cultures, folk art and the art of children, contradicted the idea of a single style valid for all time. Their presence, however, is to confirm that they are all part of one impulse. In his article 'Two Pictures', Marc states categorically:

> the artistic style that was the inalienable possession of an earlier era collapsed catastrophically in the middle of the nineteenth century. There has been no style since. It is perishing all over the world as if seized by an epidemic. (Kandinsky and Marc, 1974, p. 66)

Kandinsky himself pursued similar issues in his own contributions to the almanac, especially in the essay 'On the Question of Form'. By emphasizing the 'inner necessity' expressed in artworks, he concluded that 'in principle there is no question of form' or at least no question of a disparity between an internal meaning and an external appearance (Kandinsky and Marc, 1974, p. 168). The search is, as we have seen repeatedly now in Nietzsche's terms, a genealogical one that traces back to the will to power. Kandinsky also draws a distinction between style and form which closely approximates Nietzsche's obscure comment in *The Will to Power* that 'one is an artist at the cost of regarding that which all non-artists call "form" as content, as "the matter itself" ' (Nietzsche, 1968a, [818], p. 433). Having made art a question of volition, its value is derived from its capacity to lead back to a force for which the artist is the conduit. It is for this reason that one of the few visual artists Nietzsche praises directly in his writings is Raphael (as quoted above) whose Christian subject matter should be totally at odds with the author of *The Anti-Christ*. But Nietzsche assesses Raphael to be 'not a Christian' to the extent that his art, his ability to transform the world, is not the bearer of a moral message but the indication of an excessive power taking delight in itself.

The Artist as Actor

Expressionism still draws a distinction between inner content and outer form to the extent in which it desires the externalization of the artist's emotions. In physiological terms, Nietzsche approached this issue as 'the problem of the actor'. As early as *Human, All Too Human* (1878), he was exploring the role of

gestures and their imitation in relation to human communication and the acquisition of language (Nietzsche, 1986, [1, 216], pp. 99–100). For him, the possibility lay open for 'the corruption of style', however, from 'the desire to *demonstrate* more feeling for a thing than one actually *has*' (Nietzsche, 1986, [2, 136], p. 342). If the Apollonian dream state already had a moment of self-deception figured in it, Nietzsche's further description of the artist becomes bound up with an analysis of the drive to simulate and dissimulate:

> The problem of the actor has troubled me for the longest time. I felt unsure [. . .] whether it is not only from this angle that one can get at the dangerous concept of the 'artist' [. . .]. Falseness with a good conscience; the delight in simulation exploding as a power that pushes aside one's so-called 'character', flooding it and at times extinguishing it; the inner craving for a role and mask, for *appearance* [. . .]. (Nietzsche, 1974, [361], p. 316)

Nietzsche's analysis extended to characterize two types of artist–actor. The first, as given in the quotation above, simulates in an affirmative way seeking no obvious gain or utility but revelling in playing a part. The second follows the corruption of style and indulges in histrionics. This, for Nietzsche, was the malady of the 'modern artist' who 'in his physiology next-of-kin to the hysteric is also distinguished by this morbidity as a character' (Nietzsche, 1968a, [813], p. 430). His diagnosis of the modern artist finds the love of lying perverted into a self-contempt which is ultimately nihilistic rather than life-affirming. While this analysis would appear extremely applicable to Expressionism, the excesses of which seem surprisingly similar to the second rather than the first category, the critique was developed by Nietzsche for a specific target, that of Richard Wagner. After *The Birth of Tragedy*, which contained a preface to Wagner full of hope and praise for his renewal of German culture, the two had a drastic falling out. In 1888 Nietzsche published *The Case of Wagner* (after Wagner's death) in which he accused the latter of 'making music sick'. In fact he questioned whether Wagner was a musician at all and instead characterized him as an actor who had hypnotized the audience and bowled them over with cheap effects. Although Wagner seems a character of great power and influence, he was not an authentic artist in Nietzsche's eyes. His music did not express will to power because there was nothing in the exchange between himself and the audience who were left passive receivers rather than active listeners (Nietzsche, 1967b, §6, pp. 167–9). Also to be found in the critique of Wagner is a gendered qualification which describes the appeal of his music to women (Nietzsche, 1967b, §5, p. 166). As Derrida notes, Nietzsche's writing around creativity operates with ancient distinctions between 'active, informative productivity and virility on the one hand, and material, unproductive passivity and femininity on the other' (Derrida, 1979, p. 79). The nuances of this terminology must be followed very carefully indeed, however, as the section of the *Gay Science* which introduces the problem of the actor concludes:

> Finally, women. Reflect on the whole history of women: do they not *have* to be first of all and above all else actresses? Listen to physicians who have hypnotized women; finally, love them – let yourself be 'hypnotized by them'! What is always the end result? That they 'put on something' even when they take off everything. Woman is so artistic. (Nietzsche, 1974, [361], p. 317)

The word play at the end of this section uses '*sich geben*' twice to mean, women give themselves (put on something, behave in a particular way), when they give themselves (take off everything, succumb to seduction). Nietzsche suggests that not only is woman supremely artistic but the ultimate dissimulator. The erotic encounter suggested in this passage illuminates the expansive manner in which Nietzsche conceived the will to power and its connection to art. It constantly reveals itself in conflicts of interest and struggles for ascendancy rather than in objects of contemplation. If the sublimation of will to power into creativity can be the healthy expression of sexual instincts, Nietzsche reveals his discomfort when it is a woman who plays the role of artist. Indeed Nietzsche's account of the artistry of women is difficult to reconcile in general with his proposition of a physiology of art. For, as Irigaray points out in response to Derrida, the deconstruction of the antithesis of man and woman in the description of the artist suggests that 'physiology' is the same for both sexes, 'a notion that covers over certain natural horrors, conceals them artistically' (Irigaray, 1991, p. 117). This is perhaps best explored by reference to a persistent theme in Nietzsche's writings on creativity in which sexual difference is raised to its highest stakes, namely pregnancy and childbirth.

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche suggested that there may be indeed a final truth of woman: 'Everything about woman is a riddle, and everything about woman has one solution: it is called pregnancy' (Nietzsche, 1969, p. 91). Such statements by Nietzsche have their background in general attitudes to women in Wilhelmine Germany and the emerging women's movement of the time (Diethe, 1996). Despite objection to such apparent biological determinism, some women actively incorporated it into the burgeoning *Freikörperkultur* (body culture) as a means of countering the prudery of contemporary society and its denial of bodily functions. An interesting case in this regard is the artist Paula Modersohn-Becker for whom the image of the mother and child was of great significance. Devoid of sentimentality, her paintings of mothers show them monumentalized into life-givers often accompanied by fruit or plant forms which accentuate their nurturing role. Although the subject precedes her reading of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in 1901 (to which she responded in a very positive way), it fits closely with Nietzsche's emphasis on pregnancy as woman's destiny. The treatment of the subject by Modersohn-Becker is not moralizing but tries to get over a sensation of physical presence and plenitude.

As with all of Nietzsche's references to physiology, for him childbirth was not merely reducible to a biological procedure and in a remarkable passage

in *Twilight of the Idols*, he associates it with the whole drama of Dionysian experience:

> In the teachings of the mysteries, *pain* is sanctified: the 'pains of childbirth' sanctify pain in general – all becoming and growing, all that guarantees the future, *postulates* pain. . . . For the eternal joy in creating to exist, for the will to life eternally to affirm itself, the 'torment of childbirth' *must* also exist eternally. . . . All this is contained in the word Dionysus. (Nietzsche, 1968b, p. 110)

The confrontation with pain and the affirmation of life are familiar themes to be found above in the discussion of *The Birth of Tragedy*, whose very title could now be elaborated on with greater interest. The quotation marks placed by Nietzsche around 'pains of childbirth' suggest that they are being described in more than a literal way; they stand for the problems of creativity in a broader sense. Is this to be understood as the jealousy of the philosopher who is unable to give birth himself but tries to appropriate this power and place it under the masculine sign of Dionysus? That would be underestimating the reversal Nietzsche made in the history of aesthetics. For if the 'physiology of art' is to mean anything it is to deny that art is derived solely from human subjectivity. In fact 'art appears in man like a force of nature and disposes of him whether he will or no' (Nietzsche, 1968a, [798], p. 420). At the same time, the birth of art from the body of the artist reveals it to be not a mechanical organism but an unstable organization of forces with no univocal conscious control. As Zarathustra states, 'one must have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star' (Nietzsche, 1969, p. 46). The becoming form of this chaos is the action of the will to power of which art seen from the point of view of the artist is, for Nietzsche, the most potent example.

Notes

1 'With faith in evolution, in a new generation of creators and appreciators, we call together all youth. And as youths who embody the future, we want to free our lives and limbs from the long-established older powers. Anyone who renders his creative drive directly and authentically is one of us.' ('Mit dem glauben an Entwicklung an eine neue Generation der Schaffenden wie der Geneissenden rufen wir alle Jugend zusammen und als Jugend die die Zukunft trägt. Wollen wir uns arm und Lebensfreiheit verschaffen gegenüber dem wohlangesessenen älteren Kräften. Jeder gehört zu uns der unmittelbar und unverfälsch das wiedergiebt was ihn zu schaffen draengt.') Manifesto of *Die Brücke* reproduced in Gordon, 1987, p. 129.

2 'Because these pictures are made with blood and nerves and not with the cold calculating intellect they speak directly and suggestively' ('Da diese Bilder mit Blut und Nerven geschaffen sind und nicht mit dem kalt wägenden Verstande, sprechen sie unmittelbar und suggestiv') (Kirchner, 1925, p. 70).

3 'To "give style" to one's character – a great and rare art! It is practised by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye' (Nietzsche, 1974, [290], p. 232).
4 'Not with my hand alone I write / My foot wants to participate. / Firm and free and bold, my feet / Run across the field – and sheet' (Nietzsche, 1974, Prelude in German Rhymes #52, p. 63).

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Chapter 16

Wittgenstein, Description, and Adrian Stokes (on Cézanne)[1]

Paul Smith

> I think one reason why the attempt to find an explanation is wrong is that we have only to put together in the right way what we know, without adding anything, and the satisfaction we are trying to get from the explanation comes of itself. . . . We can only describe and say, human life is like that.
>
> *Wittgenstein*, Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*, p. 3

Adrian Stokes's achievement has, until recently, most often been described in one of two, rather different, ways. On the one hand, Stokes is said to have employed the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein to generate an explanation of form in art. By this account, form is meaningful because it embodies, but also resolves, phantasies of corporeality on the artist's part with which other spectators can identify because they are universal (see Wollheim, 1973, pp. 327–31). (Stokes thereby breaks the ostensible circularity of the formalist argument that 'significant form' is the source of the 'peculiar' emotion art offers, by specifying what is significant *in* form and what processes *make* it significant.) On the other hand, it is claimed that the 'texture' of Stokes's language closely matches that of our 'experience' of the work of art, or of our 'response' to it (see David Sylvester in Arts Council, 1982, p. 14). Stokes is adept, in other words, at a kind of description that brings out what looking at a work of art *is like*.[2]

It can look, therefore, as though psychoanalytic explanation and description merely coexist, contingently, as complementary but radically distinct aspects of Stokes's enterprise. But it could be that psychoanalysis, even at the same time as it produces explanation, also fulfils an altogether different function within Stokes's writing whereby it actually generates description. This possibility is hinted at in a memoir which recalls how Stokes resisted the temptation to use psychoanalysis as *a priori* 'theory' to generate explanation. Instead, we are told, Stokes was open to the power of psychoanalysis to 'colour' his 'sensibility' and to give him 'a way of describing' this (Richard Wollheim in Arts Council, 1982, p. 24).

What is at stake, therefore, is what counts as explanation and what as description in Stokes, how one produces and/or inhibits the other, and which furnishes the more appropriate account of the work of art. This chapter will look at these questions from the perspective of Wittgenstein's thinking. This is a particularly fertile point of view because Wittgenstein was a harsh critic of the causal explanation of aesthetic experience that psychoanalysis in particular, and science in general, purported to provide. At the same time, Wittgenstein professed himself to be a 'disciple' of Freud in so far as he admired Freud's ability to describe human affairs in novel ways (Rush Rhees in Wittgenstein, 1966, p. 41). And Wittgenstein even specifies certain conditions under which psychoanalysis can enable aesthetic description (see below). Taking all this together, Wittgenstein makes it possible to see how Stokes might not use psychoanalysis simply as a scheme for explaining art, but also as a means of achieving precisely the sort of description that the philosopher himself recommended for works of art.

Wittgenstein on Description

One reason why Wittgenstein inverted the relative importance of explanation and description is that his work on language had shown the virtue of the latter in general. That is, Wittgenstein abandoned his early view (expressed in the *Tractatus* of 1922) that there was a single, propositional 'essence' of language (residing in the ability of its 'logical form' to picture states of affairs in the world) because this unitary, theoretical account of meaning does not accommodate the variety of ways in which language can actually be used meaningfully without relying on any referential ability it may have. (The verbal equivalent of the V-sign which is said to have influenced Wittgenstein, construed as an exclamation of disgust, or as an order, is one example of such uses of language.) And so, in his 'transitional' work on Freud, and his 'late' work including the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Wittgenstein advocated that instead of stipulating what 'must be', we should 'look and see' what is the case. If we do this, it becomes clear that language is a complex 'family' of disparate 'language-games . . . consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven' (Wittgenstein, 1953, 7, 23–4, 71, 179 and p. 224e). These function according to rules proper to them, which ensure their efficacy within the manifold 'forms of life' (or social practices) making up a particular culture (ibid., 19, 23, 241 and pp. 174e and 226e). Inside language-games – e.g. giving or obeying orders, describing an object, reporting or speculating about an event, play-acting, telling a joke, translating – expressions and words function like different 'tools' (cf. ibid., 23; see also 11, 14–15, 41–2, 53, 360 and Wittgenstein, 1966, p. 4). As the best way of understanding language, therefore, Wittgenstein advocated a kind of 'description' (Wittgenstein, 1953, 24, 291 and p. 200e) which brings out the differences in the sense (his word is 'grammar') of our disparate kinds of utterance (ibid., 109 and 496).

Hence, even though this way of seeing things does not constitute a critique of explanation proper (since the *Tractatus* does not offer an explanation of the workings of language by adducing anything 'hidden' or 'deep' within it: see below), it nevertheless suggests that description has its advantages. But something of this stance does also infiltrate Wittgenstein's views on properly scientific explanations and on what purport to be these. He thus criticizes Darwin's theory of evolution, for instance, for lacking the 'necessary multiplicity' to account for the phenomena it claims to explain (from a conversation with Drury cited in Bouveresse, 1995, p. 17).

But at the same time as Wittgenstein insists that it is essential not to impose an inappropriate, theoretical (or *a priori*) unity over the diversity of language, he none the less advocates a form of description which can yield a 'perspicuous, synoptic representation', or clear overview (*übersichtliche Darstellung*), of its variety (Wittgenstein, 1979, p. 9). And again, this is a view which can, surprisingly enough, have consequences for accounts which pose as scientific explanation. For example, even though Wittgenstein considered Frazer's pseudoscientific anthropology to be meretricious as explanation, he believed it had value precisely because of its ability to yield a coherent overview of the phenomena it investigated.

Wittgenstein also had more specific reasons for considering description a *ne plus ultra* in any account of subjective experiences such as dreaming, or appreciating a work of art. In the first place, explanation is ruled out in these cases because it does not exhibit 'phenomena' for what they *are*: i.e. it does not tell us what it is *like* to dream (or to remember dreaming) or to admire a painting. But because 'grammar gives us the essence of something' (Wittgenstein, 1953, 371 and 373), the nature of such experiences *is* revealed by a 'grammatical investigation' (ibid., 90) of the expressions in which the concepts of them occur (McGinn, 1997, pp. 113–26). An investigation of the workings of the language-games of making, looking at and responding at art, for instance, reveals that these experiences (like dreaming) are all intentional, i.e. object-directed, activities within which the relationship between experience (or thought) and its object is *internal* (Glock, 1996, p. 186): that is, what someone is experiencing (or thinking) is to be identified with precisely that (or with what she or he is thinking about). One gives oneself over to what one is doing.

In the case of art, this is revealed particularly by the 'intransitive' character of the grammar of aesthetic responses (Hagberg, 1995, pp. 99–117). That is, the expressions we characteristically use to describe the experience of a work of art identify something 'peculiar' or 'particular' in it which cannot be specified in terms of something else (least of all a cause), but only in terms of the phenomenology of the experience itself. In effect, we can only specify what we mean in such cases by pointing or referring to features exhibited by the object under examination, or by describing qualities of the reaction it gives rise to. But when describing the work of art as a phenomenon, we tend to speak of one as we speak

of the other: neither the brute facts of the picture, nor the reaction in isolation from what it is a reaction *to*, quite describe what it is *like*.

The reason for this situation is that the (competent) artist ensures that the work gives shape to the feeling that she or he wants it to. The work of art is thus the 'expression' (*Äusserung*) of the experience that *it* gives rise to. The work of art is *not* a *symptom* of a cause such as an emotion which may have affected the artist when she or he began it (see Wittgenstein, 1953, 354). Neither is the work of art the exterior counterpart to a mysterious 'private', 'inner' emotion discharged in the act of painting, which and can be inferred from the author (see ibid., 269 and Hagberg, 1995, pp. 118–35). The work of art is instead the *criterion*, or public sign, of the feeling that *it* corresponds to (Cooper, 1992, p. 224; cf. Wittgenstein, 1953, 258, 580).

In this respect, any individual work of art demands a particular, or appropriate, description. But Wittgenstein also stipulates that this must be of a *kind* that allows us to 'act . . . according to' it, so that we can copy it or respond to it, for example (Wittgenstein, 1966, p. 39). A description in this sense might therefore be a 'gesture', or (by analogy with music) we might use a word like 'lovely' (ibid., 9) or 'melancholy' (ibid., 10) – which would be like giving the work of art 'a face'. But we cannot describe a picture, for instance, by drawing a numbered grid over its surface and reading off the coordinates, because this would not give us the 'expression' of its figures (ibid., pp. 38–9), nor that of the whole picture itself. The reason for this, Wittgenstein suggests, is that rather as the concept of seeing is more akin to concepts of responding or reacting (as embodied creatures) than to concepts of having or receiving visual impressions (as does a camera), so a representation of what we see is best thought of as a response too – in which case, pictures are not just maps or recordings of sorts, but also occupy the same category as gestures and smiles (see McGinn, 1977, pp. 177–204 on Wittgenstein, 1953, pp. 193–214).

Wittgenstein thus eschewed the scientific explanation of the experiences of making and looking at art because attempts to provide causal explanations of such intentional activities are either irrelevant, or convey the misleading impression that that they can be understood in terms of something else. (Adducing a causal explanation of what happens when we look at a work of art is thus tantamount to arguing that my desire for an apple is not desire *for* an apple at all, since it can be removed by a punch in the stomach (ibid., 440)). The phenomenon is what 'it is', in other words, 'and not another thing' as far as Wittgenstein is concerned (Wittgenstein, 1966, p. 27).

Wittgenstein and Psychoanalysis

For all it would seem that Wittgenstein's views are catastrophic for psychoanalysis, this is not the case. Instead, Wittgenstein regarded Freud's writing as exemplary for its ability to provide new and richer ways of seeing the content of

intentional acts. Quite unparadoxically, the argument to this effect rests on the idea that psychoanalysis is methodologically unsound as explanation.

In the strong version of Wittgenstein's view (elaborated in Bouveresse, 1995), one major problem with psychoanalysis is that it states *as fact* many conjectures about the unconscious which are incapable of being legitimately inferred from hypotheses whose predictions can be tested independently. The point is that psychoanalysis is *circular* in its manner of verifying the hypothesis of the unconscious: the analyst's operative assumption that unconscious 'causes' – actually reasons – exist which explain the patient's dreams or symptoms is only 'proven' when the analysand *accepts* this explanation.[3] Psychoanalysis is thus inquisitorial in demanding acquiescence to the analyst as a condition of a 'cure' (Bouveresse, 1995, pp. 27–33, 71–81 and 92–3).

In addition, psychoanalysis reifies and even personifies its own construction of the unconscious as a quasi-volitional homunculus inhabiting the mind (ibid., pp. 36–8) – in spite of Freud's own concession that 'primal repression' made one area of it completely unfathomable (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988, pp. 333–4). Psychoanalysis is logically incoherent too in this respect since it makes consciousness a possession of a subsidiary part of the whole person who is the only possible conscious entity. (There is no room for compromise here: since there are no small differences in grammar, something is either conscious or it is not (Bouveresse, 1995, p. 25).)

In mistaking repressed sexual motives (or the reasons of a homunculus) for the *causes* of dreams and art, psychoanalytic explanation also flirts with *reducing* these phenomena to something they are not. In this respect it makes the same mistake as we do when we confuse a *Gestalt* (or integral intentional object) with the mere aggregate of its parts. But the reductivism of psychoanalysis is persuasive because it converts dreams and art into a kind of repellent 'bawdy' that nevertheless has its own 'charm' (Wittgenstein, 1966, p. 27).

Psychoanalysis even installs the assumption of causality as an *a priori* within the 'grammar' of its explanation (Bouveresse, 1995, pp. 49, 54 and 111). (Freud's idea of the 'latent' content of the dream is an example of this process in operation.) It is thus permeated with the scientific mind-set that creates 'confusion' by postulating 'deep' or 'hidden' causes for the phenomena of human life (Bouveresse, 1995, pp. 9, 45, 72, 83 and 99). It could be said almost to approach superstition in its insistence on rigidly uni-causal explanation, especially since there is no reason to think that all dreams have a meaning that can be explained, or which explains them (Bouveresse, 1995, pp. 109 and 120). All in all then, Wittgenstein's objection against explanation in psychoanalysis is that it makes a nonsense of the intentional nature of experiences like dreaming or looking at art.

It seems implausible that Wittgenstein altogether rules out the possibility of the unconscious and repression, for instance, since (at least in his later work) he explicitly acknowledged that sometimes we can only understand why we act as we do by taking notice of the pattern exhibited by our reactions (Glock, p. 186). Particularly in the light of such concessions, the burden of Wittgenstein's cri-

tique of psychoanalysis is twofold: it gets the grammar of intentional states wrong; and it does not proceed as a proper science should. But even while this means psychoanalysis cannot explain anything radically new (as distinct from science which actually reveals entities and processes that our normal language has no description of whatsoever), it does *not* mean it is empty.

According to Bouveresse's reading of Wittgenstein, what psychoanalysis actually does is rearrange familiar facts which our normal language already describes (Bouveresse, 1995, p. 31). The significance of this achievement lies in the way that seeing is always already bound up with interpretation (Wittgenstein, 1953, pp. 200–1e). Notions like 'the unconscious', 'dream symbolism' and 'projection', for instance, have counterparts in normal language, but the meaning of these expressions is obscure and elusive. Psychoanalysis gives such phenomena a novel clarity by providing 'a manner of speaking' that 'puts two factors together', or by using a language in which 'things are placed side by side so as to exhibit certain features' (Wittgenstein cited in Bouveresse, 1995, pp. 26 and 27). So, for instance, Freud's analysis of the dream of a female agoraphobic was not the first occasion that a hat was seen as phallic (Freud, 1953–74 V, pp. 36–2); but it brought out a resemblance clearly that had remained unstated previously. By analogy, psychoanalysis did not introduce a concept with 'projection' that we did not already use (see for example Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988, pp. 349–55); but in likening it to the expulsion of body fluids, it gave projection a definition that it lacked previously. For Wittgenstein then, psychoanalysis reveals what is there more richly and/or precisely than would otherwise be possible. And it does this much like the kind of 'aesthetics' (or criticism) that works analogically, or by comparison – as when we grasp the coherence of a building through regarding architecture as a 'language' (P. M. S. Hacker as cited in Bouveresse, 1995, pp. 31–2). Its effect thus lies midway between that of a (radically) new concept which allows us to grasp a novel aspect of reality, and that of a particular way of reading a poem that points out its salient features and their coherence (rather as a gesture might in front of a picture).

Stokes and Psychoanalysis

All this bears significantly on Stokes, and it has particular relevance to Stokes's analysis of Cézanne in *Colour and Form* (Stokes, 1950). This is not because what Stokes says about Cézanne here is typical: any ambition to claim Stokes as a whole for description is thwarted by the progressively stronger and more rigid adherence to psychoanalysis and explanation of his later writings. Rather, it is to say that *Colour and Form* contains a discussion of Cézanne which is exemplary inasmuch as it illustrates how psychoanalysis *can* produce the kind of description that Wittgenstein advocates.

In *Colour and Form*, what Stokes says about Cézanne's work (directly, or by implication in his discussion of 'the painter') sits within a more general account

which sees the work of art in terms that derive from Freud (whom Stokes read assiduously from around 1920 (Wollheim, 1973, p. 317)) and from Klein (with whom he was in analysis from 1930 until 1937 (ibid., p. 328 and Arts Council, 1982, p. 52)). For Stokes then, a work of art is a 'fantasy projection' of 'those objects or figures all of us imagine inside us, figures both loving and hateful' (Stokes, 1950, p. 15). Its basic material is associated with the 'archetypal figures . . . absorbed in childhood, that are by no means at peace among themselves' (ibid., p. 50). This means it consists chiefly of internalized phantasies centred on the breast, its substitutes and the maternal body, but also of phantasies of 'good' and 'bad' parents and their body parts (including variations on the penis). Together, these supply the enduring foundations of our sense of self and other. But this scheme is complicated in Stokes by a resistance to Freud (cf. Read, 1998). Hence, as distinct from Freud or the early, 'Freudian', Klein, Stokes views art as a form of 'wish fulfilment' that expresses a 'stabilising' of the multifarious introjects that this kind of psychoanalysis catalogues (Stokes, 1950, p. 14 and p. 50).

Colour and Form also reworks many notions that only find mature expression in Klein's work of the mid-1930s, but which Stokes appears to have absorbed *avant la lettre* as her analysand (and even though he would have been discouraged from mugging up on the theory). In a nutshell, Klein leads Stokes to the view that the painter's work embodies two attitudes to form which correspond to two kinds of infantile phantasy connected with the mother's body. The first type of phantasy belongs to the 'paranoid-schizoid position', in which the infant is under the sway of phantasies wherein the breast, although initially conceived as the origin of a 'good' or blissful object-relationship, becomes (upon its repeated withdrawal) a 'bad' object that starves and tortures the infant. The child then phantasizes attacking and damaging the breast, which results in it becoming conceived of as persecutory or revenging (Klein, 1935, p. 282). The second type of phantasy pertains to the 'depressive position', in which the infant experiences guilt over the harm 'caused' by its earlier, destructive phantasies. This engenders phantasies of reparation towards the breast which, in their turn, facilitate the infant's cathexis with the maternal body conceived of as an independent and integral entity (Klein, 1935, pp. 285 and 305–6). A work of art thus embodies the earlier position if it is an example of 'modelling' or a loose agglomeration of parts. Conversely, if it is structured as an integral object – like the benign, 'whole' mother's body – it is an instance of 'carving' (see Wollheim, 1973, pp. 328–31). However, it is important to note that Stokes explicitly argues in his later essay, 'Form in art', that 'the aesthetic position . . . deserves a category of its own' distinct from Klein's depressive position (Stokes, 1955, p. 416).

Stokes does not just use Freud and Klein to form an account of the contents of form, but he also uses Freud and Klein to explain how form has content in virtue of the processes which make it possible for us to identify with it. Hence, the 'carved' picture is seen as a good object that is pre-eminently suitable for introjection or incorporation within the ego (Stokes, 1955, pp. 407 and 411–12 and 1965, p. 53) – a view which subsumes identification to a kind of 'psychic

cannibalism', or a mental process originally arising on kinds of corporeal phantasy associated with suckling the primal good object, the breast (see Freud, 1953–74, XIV 237–59, XVIII 105–8, XXII 63 and XVIII 230–1, and Klein, 1935, 282). Conversely, Stokes largely treats modelling in *Colour and Form* as a style that externalises the 'bad' part-objects requiring 'projection' – a form of expulsion from the ego that derives from phantasies arising on bodily processes of spewing and defecation. Projection is thus associated with omnipotence, denial, and the 'splitting' of objects into good and bad objects in order to rid the mind of the latter. But again, Stokes modifies his sources in *Colour and Form* in according a special status to the work of art, where, he argues, projection is employed to externalize good and bad internal objects together, and to resolve them into an introjectable object. Stokes argues, for example, that good art is to be identified with 'carving' defined as the kind of painting that 'arises from our desire to transmute . . . subjective images into those outward and fixed physical shapes to which the world of objects . . . gives the form of otherness and completeness' belonging to whole objects (Stokes, 1950, p. 71; see also Stokes, 1947, pp. 58 and 64). Stokes's work of art is thus not unlike a Winnicottian 'transitional object' in that it facilitates a measure of free play in the 'transitional space' it occupies between the subject and the outside world (cf. Stokes, 1947, p. 11, on straying from his nurse as a child in Hyde Park 'halfway' towards the 'mothers and poor children and tramp women' who frightened him).

Elsewhere in *Colour and Form*, Stokes complicates this view of art by developing a yet more refined picture of the relationship between these psychoanalytic categories as something that is reciprocal (see below). This suggests that Stokes does not use even a modified psychoanalysis to generate his account of art *a priori*; but that he uses psychoanalysis adaptively to generate *accurate* description. And, in *Colour and Form*, Stokes does not introduce the categories of carving and modelling except by way of more detailed descriptions of the characteristic effects and techniques of carved and modelled pictures, so that description actually seems to *ground* his use of psychoanalysis to some extent. In effect then, Stokes develops the categories which purportedly derive from psychoanalysis only *by way of* a description of how the early Cézanne tends towards modelling and the mature Cézanne towards carving. And even within this nexus, the stylistic features that constitute carving and modelling are sometimes discrete, but they also overlap and cross-fertilize one another.

Colour and Form is not theoretically monolithic either, since psychoanalytic ideas are made to sit within a matrix that also includes ideas about the action of water upon stone, notions of direct carving, phenomenological theories, and F. H. Bradley's metaphysical logic (Wollheim, 1973, p. 326). Stokes is quite open, for instance, about grafting a colour terminology – e.g. 'resistant-to the eye', 'surface' colour and 'spongy' 'film' colour, 'adjectival' and 'verbal' colour, 'memory colour', 'bi-polar' colour (referring to touch) and the 'total insistence' of colour – deriving from the phenomenology of David Katz onto his psychoanalytic root stock (see Stokes, 1950, pp. 21 and 16, 28–9, 91–2, 53 and 58, and

121–2, and Katz, 1935, pp. 8, 33–4, 161–6, 38, and 278. See also Stokes, 1950, pp. 17, 18, 19, 22, 26, 28 and 91, quoting Katz, 1935, pp. 74, 28–9 and 36–7, 37, 8, 280, 23 and 27, and 82). Nor are the effects Stokes derives from one paradigm simply interpolated into another. The effect Stokes calls 'efflorescence', for example, is not the same thing in stone carving as it is in carving with colour. In stone, it is a feature of the medium *itself*, which emerges through the 'figure' or forms; but in colour, efflorescence is an effect wherein *forms* emerge *through the medium* to the surface as a unit.

Stokes is also responsive to the possibility that even this sophisticated version of psychoanalytic criticism might none the less be simplistic. In particular, under the impact of F. H. Bradley's concept of 'identity-in-difference' (the idea that two apparently opposed terms can in fact share a deeper identity if they are aspects of another, larger term), Stokes came to regard carving and modelling not as strictly antithetical styles, but as elements of a larger synthesis (see Read, 1998, p. 238). For instance, he argued that 'each [conception]', in Cézanne especially, while 'partly hostile to, or exclusive of, the other . . . requires as a rule at least *something of* the other' (ibid., pp. 121–2). More specifically, Stokes characterizes the value of Cézanne's work as bound up with its ability to assimilate a residue of modelling features and to transform these, even if not quite entirely, into carved features. He argues, for instance, that Cézanne's later works dispense with the baroque 'diagonal sweep' that drew together his earlier pictures as if by *force*, whilst retaining the ability of the Baroque to organize like with like well (ibid., p. 59). (For example, the 'back-cloths' in Cézanne's still lifes press towards the surface of the picture, taking the objects they support along with them, even while they recede slightly along the diagonal.) A generically similar process is at work in Cézanne's use of local colour to convert transient appearances into an 'augmentation' (see below) which allows 'us to feel nature as eternal' (ibid., p. 55). His point is that Cézanne realizes this 'carving conception' with 'the accumulated material of plasticity', or by synthesizing sensations experienced piecemeal over a long period. (For example, the facets that build to a unity of colour in many Cézannes also evoke individual fingerprints which recruit sensations of touch.)

This kind of description is recapitulated in Stokes's later belief that modelling and carving are of equal value. In 'Form in Art' (Stokes, 1955, p. 419), for example, Stokes relates modelling positively to the 'oceanic' feeling that the infant has at the breast, and not just to the destructive and persecutory phantasies of the 'paranoid-schizoid' position; while carving is downgraded somewhat by dint of its association with depressive anxiety and the 'whiff of death' this carries with it (ibid., p. 413). In a different vein, Stokes asserts in *The Invitation in Art* that the modelled picture, inasmuch as it resembles an aggregate of part-objects, suggests 'a process in train' whereby it transcends stress, or promises to attain to a whole object (Stokes, 1965, p. 19). And even though this kind of picture cannot evoke the 'introjectory-projectory processes' with the force of a carved work, it nevertheless exerts a 'pull' that allows the spectator to

grasp 'otherness' more 'poignantly' (ibid., pp. 16–17). In the light of these and other remarks on the dynamic synthesis of carving and modelling (see Stokes, 1965, pp. 58–9), Cézanne's mature work is at least implicitly more affective than simple carving.

Description in Stokes

Even this much shows that Stokes's writing employs psychoanalysis in concert with other theories to produce descriptions that are sufficiently elastic and multifarious to fit the works of art he considers, and the responses they engender. Psychoanalysis thus provides Stokes with analytical categories that (with others) are sufficiently telling to reveal a pattern among the diverse phenomena of Cézanne's style, or to yield the kind of clear overview Wittgenstein advocated that does equal justice to similarities and differences. In particular, Stokes makes it possible to see that Cézanne's style – for all that it changes in unpredictable ways at unexpected times, even dramatically backtracking at certain moments – does actually exhibit a broad pattern inasmuch as it evolves from the predominantly modelled idiom of the early years into the largely carved style of his artistic maturity. Psychoanalytic categories also help Stokes explain how, for instance, Cézanne's work of the 1870s facilitates the transition to carving by redeploying the darkened colours previously employed for contrast within modelling as elements of a harmony of equally insistent colours.

However, psychoanalysis does not merely coexist, 'symbiotically', with description within Stokes; it actually facilitates description in providing categories that allow Stokes to identify and pick out particular emotional *effects* of colour. This also depends on Stokes characterizing Cézanne's colour primarily in terms of its effects as a vehicle of *form*, and only secondarily in terms of effects as surface decoration – as did the artist (see Doran, 1978, pp. 16, 36, 58 and 87). Stokes is thus committed, *in practice*, to identifying effects of colour-form that are always already laden with feelings. One way, therefore, that Stokes specifies the intentional effects of pictures like Cézanne's is by pointing to those features which give rise to particular responses on his part (cf. Carrier, 1986, p. 765, on Stokes's pointing compared to Wittgenstein's).

So it is that, even while Stokes subscribes to explanation in using a psychoanalytically loaded vocabulary of 'carving' and 'modelling', this nevertheless makes it possible for him to show how our response to Cézanne's paintings involves embodied reactions to pictures (and their elements) which affect the spectator as if *they* were bodies (or body parts) like her or his own. For instance, Cézanne's colour is 'like an efflorescence upon the stone' which exhibits 'growth' and enacts the 'mutual evocation' of one form by another (Stokes, 1950, p. 34). Cézanne's is 'a *mutually* enhancing florescence' of 'organic colour' (ibid., p. 39) in which each part contributes *equally* towards the creation of a sum or whole (whereas in modelling, the 'mere balance of masses' simply keeps the separate

warring factions of the picture in equilibrium). Efflorescence is linked closely with 'augmentation' or the way that 'forms' in a carving work 'each have a face which [the painter] discloses', and which (like faces) exhibit 'all that is within' them as such, rendering 'an accumulation of time [capable of being] apprehended instantaneously' (ibid., pp. 30–1). Efflorescence is also closely allied to 'rooted affinity', which describes how 'one form' appears 'with roots in another . . . from which it grows', but which also describes how the offshoot form manifests the 'opposite nature' of what Stokes describes elsewhere as its 'parent' form (ibid., pp. 49, 33 and 73).

This simultaneous likeness and unlikeness also emerges in the effect of 'mitigation': a colour's ability to induce itself optically in its complementary, and thereby to lessen contrast and effect a rapprochement with its opposite (ibid., pp. 49 and 42). Cézanne frequently breaks one complementary inside another physically to realize this effect, a technique advocated several times in the only book on colour that we know he owned: J.-D. Régnier's *On Light and Colour in the Old Masters* of 1865 (see pp. 27, 31, 33, 35, 36, 42, 44–5, 47, 49, 51 and 54).[4] Stokes also mentions another effect that Cézanne probably learned from Régnier: the pictorial unity a Mediterranean painter achieves through depicting the action of shadows and reflections (especially from the ground) throughout the scene represented (cf. Régnier, pp. 32, 39, 40, 42 and 44). Stokes's description of Cézanne is thus far from being either nebulous or arbitrary; but more importantly, for Stokes, these unifying effects rest upon and demonstrate the fact that the carved painting is an 'independent self-orientated and productive mechanism' of equally active, connected parts – just like 'the human body' (Stokes, 1950, p. 52).

Stokes later describes another aspect of carving that is pronounced in Cézanne, and which turns out to be corporeal: its way of exhibiting the painter's *process*, or of declaring how 'the material is given' simultaneously with 'that which is . . . carved out of [it]' (ibid., p. 61). Hence 'a well-coloured picture' exhibits harmony as a function of the separation, dispersal and mixture of the colour it begins life as. Ideally, this colour is white, in which case, the carver achieves a 'division of the white flame of life in terms of graduated colour'. (Stokes adds: 'under this image, I conceive the painting of Cézanne' (ibid., p. 62)). The corollary effect is that the painter's 'workings and developments' hark back to their 'material in its pristine unsullied state' (ibid., p. 62). That is, the colours of the final picture suggest they might be pulled apart and exhibited, as they sometimes are in the centre of Cézanne's paintings, in their original form: as unmixed tube colours, or more elementally still, as white. The colours of a carved Cézanne thus demonstrate corporeality in that they exhibit their emergence from a primitive condition, *and* their potential return to it. In other words, pictures, like people, undergo birth and death.

Stokes is also committed to psychoanalytic 'explanation' inasmuch as he uses concepts of projection (and introjection); but these work in much the same way as psychoanalytically derived concepts of corporeality. In effect, they allow

Stokes to bring out how we react to paintings like Cézanne's through intentional processes (of identification and empathy) that we already speak of meaningfully in our normal language.

Stokes's Descriptive Language

Because the work of art is the sole criterion of the feeling it affords, the only other way of specifying the intentionality involved in a Cézanne (aside from eliciting its corporeal features) is to describe one's embodied reaction to it. As already implied, Stokes does the one as he does the other in bringing out how we, as embodied creatures, *respond* to the other body that is the work of art. More particularly, the descriptions cited above show how Stokes expresses his embodied reactions in a language which makes it plain that this is what they are (as distinct, say, from 'mental' acts of 'disinterested' contemplation). In effect then, Stokes's language implicitly gets the grammar of aesthetic responses right.

One way of approaching the significance of this is through a closer consideration of our aesthetic language-games. It may seem that every type of verbal account of works of art – aesthetic criticism, psychoanalytical aesthetics or metaphysical speculation – is equally valid since the fact that people *can* follow the rules for the use of the expressions belonging to these different types of language-game seems to indicate that they understand what they mean. This would be true if understanding an expression were simply, or entirely, a matter of understanding the rules for its use. But there is more to meaning than that. Even if the world-picture (*Weltbild*) a person has grown up with seems built on an unshakeable foundation of certainty (Wittgenstein, 1975, 93–7), there is a way of testing a language-game for 'ideology' by looking at the grounding its meaningful use requires (this argument is from Curtis, 1998). In this scheme, the immediate ground of any language-game is the fact that we have 'agreement' in our 'form of life' (Wittgenstein, 1953, 241). This means not only that we share ways of speaking and acting as a consequence of our being trained in a particular culture; but it also means that, as human beings, we share the nonrationalizable grounding that our cultural or 'complicated form[s] of life' (ibid., p. 174) have in 'primitive' forms of life (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 218e and 1975, 475), which are 'beyond being justified or unjustified' (Wittgenstein, 1975, 359). One language-game can therefore derive meaning from a particular form of life, or from its relationship to another language-game and/or form of life; but *ultimately* a language-game must be grounded in a form of life that is irreducible. (While we learn the meaning of the word 'pain', for example, by learning the rules of the language-games involving it, our sharing the intentional states which ground primitive pain-behaviours is what makes our more developed linguistic behaviour meaningful *at all*. Or at least, 'one possibility' is that talk of (our own) pain makes sense because it is a learned form of 'expression' that 'replaces' more

'primitive' pain-behaviour (Wittgenstein, 1953, 244). Talk of pain is not 'ideology' in the sense of being empty, in other words.)

By this account, 'the extension of a concept in a theory' (Wittgenstein cited in Bouveresse, 1995, p. xvi) is a perfectly legitimate move if it retains its grounding in a primitive form of life; but some talk loses touch with its primitive grounding altogether, and becomes so attenuated that it only makes 'sense' within the esoteric form of life where it happens to command 'agreement' for contingent reasons (such as fashion, or its appeal to group interest). It could be argued that this sometimes happens with the language-games of psychoanalysis, philosophy and aesthetics, especially where the concepts employed have no real scientific or empirical grounding either. In these cases, therefore, talk becomes empty because it aspires to go beyond the point where it *can* be grounded. By this account, Stokes's language is remarkable because even while it strictly applies psychoanalytical concepts which are not unassailable, it gives the strong impression *at the same time* that it is a learned substitute for more primitive, and corporeal, aesthetic reactions – especially since it harnesses rhythm and other phonic qualities to evoke emotions while it directs attention to the work of art.

Put another way: Stokes uses what Wittgenstein calls 'secondary' language – a poetic form grounded in more primitive behaviour and language – that ekes out the peculiar effects of the work as if it were in front of the reader (Wittgenstein, 1953, 282 and p. 216e). This use of language is perfectly 'in order' though because it 'fulfils its purpose' (ibid., 87). Analysis of the propositional sense of the language-games of aesthetic forms of life is simply misplaced in other words: we know what these mean, even if we cannot say precisely what their sense is, because they are grounded in sincere reactions. (Aesthetic reactions can, of course, be called into doubt, but insincere reports of aesthetic reactions are only meaningful at all in virtue of parasitically trading off our foundational ability to understand their sincere counterparts (ibid., 249).)

Notwithstanding, Stokes's poetic language is indebted to psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis not only provides the analogies which form the basis of many of Stokes's soundest insights, but it also gives him a means of expressing these *at all*: by providing an analogical vocabulary which is capable of being, and is, adapted poetically – even if this is not what Stokes tells himself he is doing. It would seem fair to say then that psychoanalysis supplies many of the root forms of Stokes's elaborated language, for all that *this* is the only adequate form in which responses such as his can be given shape.

Stokes, Painting and the Body

It is not easy to maintain, as Wittgenstein suggests we ought to, that psychoanalysis simply provides Stokes with analogies which describe what it is like to experience a work of art: the pressure to find a 'deeper' explanation is part of our modern culture. There is also evidence of a sort that suggests there *has to be*

an explanatory route towards understanding Cézanne. For one thing, the artist subscribed to a theory of 'sensation' that envisaged perception as a two-way process whereby subject and object infiltrated one another (Doran, 1978, pp. 27–8, 31, 40, 78 and 94), a theory which finds a psychoanalytical formulation *avant la lettre* in a version by Taine that Cézanne is likely to have known.[5] In this, Taine effectively maintains that the painter paints his inner self by getting 'inside' the object which has got under his skin, arguing: 'When a man is born with talent . . . this faculty allows him to *penetrate into* the interior of objects. . . . And this very lively and personal sensation does not remain inactive, the whole thinking and nervous machine is *shaken* by its repercussions. Such a man expresses his interior sensation involuntarily . . . he feels the need to represent – over and above the object itself – the way he conceives it' (Taine, 1865, pp. 61–2). It could seem at least that Taine is describing processes internal to artistic perception which correspond closely to processes that Klein (elaborating Freud) explains as 'projective identification' (locating oneself inside an external object), introjection (incorporating the object in phantasy), and projection (externalizing the object incorporated in phantasy). For Freud and Klein, all these processes arise primarily on oral phantasies, and *can only* be understood in these terms, much as primitive aesthetic reactions – 'I could eat you' or 'You make me sick' – are steeped in oral phantasy.

The argument in favour of the necessity of psychoanalysis to understanding Cézanne gains further credence from the evidence of the artist's obsessional worries about the 'skin' of colour in his pictures, particularly at the edges of objects, since this could be related (genetically or causally) to the artist's hypersensitivity about being touched. Specifically psychoanalytic interpretation can also enrich the content of Cézanne's paintings greatly. Stokes argues, for instance, that the urgency with which we attempt to project phantasy onto 'other' objects is a way of establishing 'the completeness or externality of death' by means of Eros (Stokes, 1945, p. 179; see Stokes, 1947, pp. 69–70). By this account, Cézanne's paintings of metaphorical objects could involve a measure of reflexive self-consciousness about the imminence of death (if he realized what he was doing). Stokes would also seem to suggest that looking at Cézanne (or any fully absorbing art) can enhance our sense of being alive by giving us some appreciation of what it might be like to die. There are good aesthetic reasons then for wanting to credit psychoanalysis.

From a Wittgensteinian point of view, however, even this type of psychoanalytic explanation displaces or impoverishes the intentionality involved in making and looking at the picture by reducing it to 'causes'. One way of avoiding this problem is to regard the processes identified by psychoanalysis as the *substrate* of the intentionality directed at the picture (Gardner, 1992, following Wollheim). In this scheme, what happens when Cézanne paints, or when we look at his paintings, is to be identified with the irreducible intentionality of a whole person, but it can be said to have a grounding in processes of projection and introjection. Seen this way, the grammar of our normal language remains in place, but some

light is cast upon the (hidden) processes underlying conscious experience, to which normal language can only point elliptically. This way, explanation also provides a reflexive awareness that answers to the puzzlement which is internal to the activity of looking at pictures. Psychoanalytic explanations in particular allow us to appreciate just *why* looking at pictures can, as has often been remarked, be like an intimate contact with another embodied person (see for example Hagberg, 1995, pp. 169–80).

Notwithstanding, this argument misidentifies what is at stake in Wittgenstein's insistence on the irrelevance of explanation to art. *Any* argument that introduces causal explanation into the understanding of art, however nuanced, must violate the tenet that all we can do is describe. What Cézanne does, or what we see, can thus be illuminated by the analogies psychoanalysis throws up; but it can *only* be expressed in the normal (including poetic) language that we already understand. Causes, substrates and the like cannot play a part in illuminating Cézanne, in other words, because neither he, nor we, recognize their operation *as such* within the intentionality that goes on when we look at the picture aesthetically.

So it is that when Cézanne described what it was like to paint a still life, all he *actually* reported is that he was able to identify with the fruits he painted: 'Fruits . . . love having their portraits painted. . . . They . . . speak to you about the fields they have left behind. . . . When I'm outlining the skin of a lovely peach, or the melancholy of an apple, with touches of pulpy paint, I catch a glimpse in the reflections they exchange of the same mild shadow of renunciation' (Doran, 1978, p. 157). Of course, it could be argued that our ability to perceive significant similarities between fruits and ourselves *at all* rests on unconscious processes, and that the morphological similarities such objects exhibit to ourselves merely set limits to the *projections* we can make. But this would miss the point: there is no need to go this far because the *phenomenology* of the experience of a work of art is that we make such connections on the basis of simple *metaphorical* similarities: as Cézanne says, fruits face us as people do, they have individual histories and they each possess a skin. Similarly, Taine (as quoted above) does not *require* any explicitly psychoanalytical reformulation for his ideas about identification to make sense. And in another passage where he discusses the connections between colour and touch, Taine even suggests that identification can be premised simply on the ability to recognize how colour wraps objects in an optical 'skin' of colour resembling our own skin. That is, for Taine, while sensations other than of colour 'are situated within a body belonging to us . . . our sensations of colour seem, on the contrary, situated beyond this, on the surface of bodies foreign to ours, beyond the limited constant circle in which we are enclosed' (Taine, 1871, p. 310).

On a Wittgensteinian view, it is finally what Stokes does through description *tout court* that must constitute his achievement. In the first place, this must be what he makes it possible for his reader to see. In the case of Cézanne, this is that his paintings, and the objects within them, are as if they were bodies: the optical skin of colour produced by the depicting surface plots and thematizes the

skin-like surfaces of individual objects like apples, but it also assimilates these to its own, overall, organic unity (rather as a mosaic optically assimilates its constituent pieces (Stokes, 1950, pp. 59 and 111)). The painting is thus like the embodied artist and spectator, and we may relate to it as we do to other persons (which could involve our recognition of their 'otherness', or our acquiescence to their 'invitation'). These may be truistic observations, but their content is so easily overlooked that it represents a considerable perceptual gain to make them (see Wittgenstein, 1953, 129) – especially as they might form the basis of a phenomenological argument about the embodiedness and reciprocity of the act and content of seeing. But Stokes adds something else to this recognition, even on a strong version of Wittgenstein's view: he shows that kinds of externalization and identification are essential, and internal, to the artist's and spectator's appreciation of what the painting is and does. And so, even if there is nothing 'radically new' here, Stokes none the less succeeds in bringing out how a perception of our kinship to entities whose life is dependent on their embodiment is part of looking at Cézanne. He thus illuminates how an existential thought about the dependence of our own life upon our embodiment can arise *within* acts of looking at Cézanne's depicted objects or the painting containing them.

Conclusion

Among the many things Stokes's writing does, it takes us to the heart of what Cézanne *is like*. This means, first of all, that Stokes's writing is a world away from the everyday language that is used to categorize things. Such language makes everything the same, or flattens out the 'differences' between experiences of visual art and those we have when we use language, whereas Stokes's poetic idiom conjures up what looking at art, considered as a (relatively) distinct form of life, is like. Secondly, Stokes uses words to make Cézanne's works present in their particularity and sensuous immediacy.

In doing this much, however, Stokes's writing makes it apparent how the work of art must, finally, elude words, because paintings and words can never give rise to identical experiences. Stokes thereby makes us aware of the limitations of our language; but, more importantly, he gives us an intimation of the sorts of expressions we *might* use to encapsulate our aesthetic experiences. We could reasonably conclude from this that the language of our present, or actual, culture has no *use* for such expressions, but that we *could* describe what Cézanne is like if only we had different forms of life in which such expressions made sense. But for this to be the case, we would have to inhabit a radically different social and political world from our own, one possessed of the same kind of plenitude as Cézanne's.

Put simply, Stokes shows how we must accept that description is all we can do if we are to include intentionality within our account of the work of art (which we must if we are to say what it *is*). In demonstrating this, however, Stokes shows just how much can be achieved by description that cannot be achieved by

explanation. In this respect, Stokes unwittingly foreshadows Wittgenstein, for whom description had greater completeness than explanation when it came to understanding human life. But Wittgenstein also held the conviction that description was of equal importance as explanation as a *methodology*. And Stokes, in the description he gives of Cézanne, gives expression to the same conviction – even if only unwittingly.

Notes

1 I am grateful to Charles Harrison, David Hulks, Maggie Iversen, John Nash, Alex Potts, Richard Shiff, Rachel Withers and especially Carolyn Wilde for their remarks on earlier versions of this text. In his introduction to *The Thread of Ariadne* (Stokes, 1925), John Middleton Murry argued that Stokes could be compared to the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* for holding the view that art *showed*, rather than *said*, something beyond words which is identifiable with the ethical. Although there may be something in this remark in so far as it derives from Wittgenstein's account of meaning in the *Tractatus*, this is emphatically not the argument advanced in this chapter, which draws on Wittgenstein's later view of language. According to this, there are many kinds of utterances that we make about, or in front of, or with respect to, art within which different ways of showing and saying are threaded together in ways peculiar to the 'language-games' in operation. So even if there are continuities as well as divergences between the *Tractatus* and the later work, generalizations about a single kind of contrast between 'saying' and 'showing' are misleading if used to describe the multifarious asymmetries and incommensurabilities, as well as different kinds of similarities, involved in the web of relationships between art and language.

2 Of late, Richard Read has argued that (what Geoffrey Newman calls) the 'fit' between Stokes's words and works of art is more temporary than absolute since the 'semiosis' wherein words and work are (only) provisionally matched in Stokes is complicated by his ambiguous and strained relationship to psychoanalysis (Read, 1998). Most significantly perhaps, Read argues that Stokes resists Freud's contention that the censorship of the unconscious (such as operates in dreams) wins out in art over its ability to integrate unconscious material with visual form (even while Stokes uses Freudian ideas on unconscious spontaneity to resist Pound with the idea that his laboriously compressed art is the 'unconscious' expression of Victorian literalness).

3 The tendency of psychoanalysis to mistake reasons for causes has the fortuitous consequence that it offers the type of 'therapy' based on acquiescence that Wittgenstein uses himself to untangle the confusions caused by the misuse of language (Wittgenstein, 1953, 133; cf. McGinn, 1977, pp. 23–7). What is more, in insisting upon the patient's agreement as a criterion for the validity of the explanation, Freud and Klein are more scrupulous than the many art historians who are untroubled by the fact that dead artists cannot talk back. And, even if Freud was not as scrupulous as he claimed to be about collating *all* the facts relevant to an analysis, he was still less selective than many art historians.

4 On Cézanne's familiarity with Régnier's text, see R. Ratcliffe, *Cézanne's Working Methods and their Theoretical Background* (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1960),

p. 166, and J. de Beucken, *Un Portrait de Cézanne* (Paris, Gallimard, 1955), p. 304.

5 Cézanne was a close friend of Zola whose enthusiasm for Taine's ideas on 'temperament' seems to have infiltrated his *Mon Salon* of 1865. This was dedicated to Cézanne in acknowledgement of the many discussions on art that they had had in the years prior to its publication.

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Chapter 17

Modernism and the Idea of the Avant-Garde

Paul Wood

The 'avant-garde' is a term which pervades writing about modern art, but it is a radically unstable concept. What it originally meant in the early nineteenth century, when an old military idea was applied to art for the first time, was pretty much the opposite of what it came to mean in the second half of the twentieth century when it became ubiquitous. From the Second World War onwards it has been employed as a label for the Modern movement in general, and more particularly as an equivalent for 'Modernism': that conception of modern art as an increasingly autonomous field devoted not to the communication of information about a wider world of historical action, but to the production of aesthetic effects. Yet the term's original meaning emerged in the early nineteenth century in a political milieu in which utopian socialists like Henri de Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier conceived of art as a means to the end of social progress. By the time of the 'year of revolutions' 1848, the avant-gardist par excellence, Gustave Courbet, was setting his own practice of a socially committed 'realist' art against what he called the 'pointless objective of art for art's sake' (Harrison, Wood and Gaiger, 1998, p. 372). Already though, during the course of the nineteenth century, this politically underwritten conception of an 'avant-garde' took on an increasingly significant aesthetic dimension; a shift of emphasis that was ultimately made complete on the eve of the Second World War in the early writings of Clement Greenberg, particularly the essay 'Avant-garde and kitsch' of 1939.

It was only when the Modernist conceptualization of modern art itself began to disintegrate around the time of another 'year of revolutions' – 1968 – that the historical meanings of avant-gardism were reinvestigated. By this time Greenberg's increasingly conservative politics had caused him to view the notion with suspicion, regarding its implicit dynamic of innovation as more likely to produce fashionable novelty ('kitsch') than genuine aesthetic achievement. And indeed, the term had overflowed its banks to become shorthand for anything vaguely fashionable, expensive and slightly risky. It adorns sites as disparate as night clubs, hairdressing salons and pop music magazines. The literature on art also remains full of references to the avant-garde; in effect, its use as a synonym for

Modernism – even for 'postmodern' manifestations – has remained canonical. For certain critical historians however, at the moment of Modernism's crisis in the sixties, the point of reviewing the notion of avant-gardism was to reinstate the social and political dimension that had been increasingly occluded. Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant Garde* originated in debates conducted in German universities in the wake of the social upheavals of 1968, although it did not appear in English until as late as 1984. In contrast to Modernist writers, Bürger limited his conception of the avant-garde to Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism and a few kindred movements which emerged around the time of the First World War and the Russian Revolution. For Bürger these counted as 'avant-garde' precisely because they rejected aesthetic autonomy and tried to fuse art with the 'praxis of life'. To that extent, Bürger's work, as well as that of other critical historians such as Nicos Hadjinicolou and T. J. Clark, marked a point of reconnection with the original socialist meanings of the term. The rest of this chapter goes on to review some of the historical transformations of the concept; in particular the way in which an explicit call for the arts to assume a leadership role in social change turned into an assertion of art itself as a site of value sealed against the uncertainties of history and what Greenberg himself regarded (not unjustifiably at the close of the 1930s) as the threat of 'ideological confusion and violence' (Greenberg, 1939, p. 36).

It is now generally accepted that the first use of the term 'avant-garde' to apply to the arts occurred in writings published under the name of the French utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon in 1825 (though the actual passage seems to have been composed by a younger collaborator, possibly Olinde Rodriguez). The concept appears at the end of a book called *Opinions littéraires, philosophiques et industrielles* in a hypothetical debate between a thinker, or 'savant', a practically minded businessman–industrialist, and an artist. Towards the end of his peroration, the artist says: 'Let us unite. To achieve our one single goal, a separate task will fall to each of us. We, the artists, will serve as the avant-garde: for amongst all the arms at our disposal, the power of the Arts is the swiftest and most expeditious. When we wish to spread new ideas amongst men, we use in turn, the lyre, ode or song, story or novel; we inscribe those ideas on marble or canvas. . . . We aim for the heart and imagination, and hence our effect is the most vivid and the most decisive.' The author then continues: 'If today our role seems limited or of secondary importance, it is for a simple reason: the Arts at present lack those elements most essential to their success – a common impulse and a general scheme' (Harrison, Wood and Gaiger, 1998, pp. 37–41).

The precise significance of this argument is however open to debate, and the ambiguities inherent in the term from the very start run through its usage down into the middle of the twentieth century. For Donald Drew Egbert, the American historian who first unearthed the actual Saint-Simonian text, the socialist writer had ushered in a tradition of thought according to which certain practices of art and certain political practices were believed to be in advance of the majority of others. In the case of art this ultimately licenses the appellation 'avant-

garde' as a name for those 'movements' whose technical radicalism marked them off from more orthodox approaches to art. In this way later movements such as Cubism or Abstract Expressionism become distinguished as 'avant-garde' relative to more traditional or academic styles. However, there is an alternative view. Another of the 'revisionist' historians, Nicos Hadjinicolou, pointed out that Saint-Simon did not in fact distinguish one approach to art making from others. What he seems to be saying is that art *as such* has a powerful social role to play in terms of getting ideas across: Saint-Simon's 'general scheme'. It is clear that this 'general scheme', which until then the arts are supposed to have lacked, refers to Saint-Simon's version of socialism. What follows from this is something rather different from a concept of increasingly autonomous and technically radical art. If art is a tool for getting across important ideas, the last thing it needs is to become difficult to understand. On this reading, art has to be popular, relevant and accessible. Rather than being like modern Western art, it would be more like social – or 'Socialist' – Realism. If the key to the Western or 'modern' sense of an artistic avant-garde is its independence, on this other understanding art is anything but independent; it must communicate the 'general scheme'. And the 'general scheme' does not come from art; it comes from politics. From this point of view, to assume that art as such can be in the vanguard is to be in the thrall of ideology. Indeed, as late as 1973, the *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* remained convinced that 'avant-gardism as a whole is saturated with capitalist and petty bourgeois individualism' (p. 519).

Such a shift of emphasis did however start to occur in the late nineteenth century. The Neoimpressionist Paul Signac who, along with certain other Impressionists like Pissarro, embraced an anarchist politics, argued that: 'It would be an error – an error into which the best informed revolutionaries, such as Proudhon, have too often fallen – systematically to require a precise socialist tendency in works of art.' For Signac, the revolutionary tendency 'will be found much stronger and more eloquent in pure aesthetics'. It is through 'their new technique' that the anarchist-Impressionists have best 'contributed their witness to the great social process which pits the workers against Capital' (Harrison, Wood and Gaiger, 1998, pp. 795–8). The idea of the radical artist as a progressive social force was increasingly inflected by the belief that the art itself must needs be radical *as art*, and not just as the vehicle for a politically radical critique of society. The most emphatic example of this was Rimbaud's evocation, at the very moment of the Paris Commune, of an 'objective', technically radical, poetry whose rhythms, as he saw it, move in time to the social struggle. It is not clear what this actually means beyond a somewhat metaphorical sense of the staccato or the mechanical, nor is it clear how this might be translated into the terms of other art forms. But what is clear is that for Rimbaud it was not enough for the poetry to have social stuggle for its subject matter; it must be infused formally with tension, stress and conflict. And to complicate matters further, what is also clear is that in Rimbaud's view such an art would no longer merely be a response to action, but 'will be ahead of it (*sera en avant*)' (Harrison, Wood and Gaiger,

1998, pp. 568–9). That idea echoes through twentieth-century avant-gardism. But mostly in the second half of the nineteenth century, the concept of an avant-garde seems to have been employed in political contexts, where it was used by radical political groupings, not only of the Left but, as Hadjinicolou (1982) has shown, of the extreme Right too.

Avant-Garde and Political Radicalism

Despite the use made of the idea in 1870s and 80s in France by figures like Rimbaud and Signac, Seurat and Théodore Duret, it was not until the early twentieth century that the term gained wider currency in something like its modern usage. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records that its first appearance in English was in 1910. Around the same time in France, Apollinaire used it to describe contemporary Cubist and Futurist artists. The idea had a resonance in French anarchist-Symbolist circles in the late nineteenth century, but it seems to have become more widespread in the early twentieth century. It is hard to be precise as to why this should be, but it cannot have been unconnected with the increased climate of social radicalism in the years before the First World War. Around 1902, in *What is to be Done*?, Lenin formulated the conception of the 'vanguard' party. Bolshevism became a distinctive political force, and the term became inextricably associated with the revolutionary communist opposition to bourgeois society. It was this increased prominence of the term in its political register, allied to the emergence in the early twentieth century of increasing numbers of technically radical art movements such as Fauvism, Expressionism and Cubism – which clearly threatened conventional taste and sensibilities – that stimulated a more widespread adoption of the idea of an artistic avant-garde critical of social as well as artistic convention. Precisely this, however, means that the idea as it was current in the early twentieth century was not the idea that later became dominant. The early twentieth-century conception of the artistic avant-garde had moved on from Saint-Simon's original view, but still had its roots in the generalized Romantic conception of artists as, in Shelley's words, the 'unacknowledged legislators of the world'. At that time, to be 'avant-garde' was to be something with a political edge. Understanding what happens in the next period is the key to the Modernist redefinition of the 'avant-garde'.

The immediately noticeable thing is that, in the major English-language writings on art in the period up to the Second World War, compared with what came later the concept of the avant-garde is conspicuous by its absence. In the writing of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, of R. H. Wilenski and Herbert Read, and in America, of Thomas Craven and Alfred Barr, it hardly crops up at all. Virtually every general reference is to 'modern art', 'the modern movement', 'the modern movement in art', 'the modern schools' and so on. Every so often the idea leaks out, but the term almost never. I have been unable to find it in Bell or Fry (which is not of course to say that it might not occur somewhere, but it is not a major

organizing concept in their writing). It does not appear in Wilenski's summative *Modern Movement in Art* of 1927, nor in Read's *Art Now* of 1933.

The exception which proves the rule, however, is that Read does pay homage to the *idea* of artistic leadership in his Preface to *Art Now*. While strongly emphasizing 'the independence of art and politics', Read argues that: 'The prejudice against modern art is, I am convinced, the result of a confined vision or a narrow range of sensibility. People forget that the artist (if he deserves that name) has the acutest sense of us all; and he can only be true to himself and his function if he expresses that acuteness to the final edge. We are without courage, without freedom, without passion and joy, if we refuse to follow where he leads' (Read, 1948, pp. 11, 12). The point is that unlike most of his prominent colleagues, Read espoused a form of anarchist politics and so can be seen as a descendent of the nineteenth-century radical discourse on avant-gardism. In a wartime essay written in the early 1940s titled 'The Cult of Leadership', he embraces 'the communism of Kropotkin and not that of Marx' (which is to say, anarchism rather than the by-then hegemonic Stalinism), and he defines his vision of appropriate leadership. Read makes a distinction between 'the kind of leader who impresses a group by asserting his authority, and the kind who expresses the group by being susceptible to their thoughts, feelings and desires. It is this second kind of leader, and only this kind of leader, who has a place in a community of free people.' He goes on, 'And who is the leader who expresses the thoughts, feelings and desires of the people – who but the poet and artist?' Read explicitly invokes the tradition of Shelley to back up his claim: 'the idea that it is the man of imagination, the poet and philosopher above all, but equally the man who can present ideas in the visual images of painting and sculpture or through the still more effective medium of drama – the idea that it is this individual whom society should accept as its only leader' (Read, 1943, pp. 31–2).

We can see then that the idea of the artist being in a position of leadership with respect to society at large was present in English-language writing on modern art, but it was by no means central; and even in Read's work there is a sense of an idea that 'dare not speak its name'. A clue to the problem of the absence of the term 'avant-garde' can be gleaned from a phrase of Read's we quoted earlier: 'the prejudice against modern art'. Art was then, as by and large it has remained, the province of the well-to-do. Yet in the mid-1930s the well-to-do were not in confident mood. The Russian Revolution was less than twenty years behind. The crisis of international capitalism was in full swing, affecting all the western European nations and the United States. The system was anything but stable. And the concept of the 'avant-garde' had an extremist lineage. Read's herbivorous version notwithstanding, the rhetoric of an avant-garde was widely associated in the West with anarchism and revolutionary communism. Hadjinicolou has pointed out that the concept was not the exclusive property of the Left. But the fact that the Italian avant-gardist Marinetti became a fascist sympathizer did not mean that his rants about polyphonic tides of revolution sweeping away the museums and libraries were likely to be any more congenial

to the culturally aware bourgeois than the Bolshevik Mayakovsy's stated desire to throw Pushkin and Rembrandt overboard from the steamship of modernity.

We can feel some of this sensibility at work in the early writings of Alfred H. Barr. Barr was to become the doyen of modern art in America. At the age of twenty-five, he offered the first course to study modern art in any American college, at Wellesley in Boston in 1927. He was appointed curator of the unprecedented Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1929 (it opened the week after the Wall Street crash). He virtually invented the modern art exhibition and the exhibition catalogue. In the late 1920s and early 1930s he was an adventurous figure, acquiring on a series of trips wide first-hand knowledge of the whole range of European modern art, theatre and film, including visits to Germany at the very moment of the Nazi assumption of power and, most extraordinary of all, a three-month trip to the Soviet Union in early 1928. In the brief but important programmatic writings for his new course, and subsequently for the new museum, which are reprinted in his selected writings (Barr 1986), Barr employs the concept of the avant-garde not once. The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), as a generation of social historians of art have relentlessly pointed out, has been funded from the start by the elite of America's elite – the Goodyears, the Crowningshields, the Sullivans, and above all the Rockefellers. Barr effortlessly defined modern art in terms that would appeal to his sponsors and avoid any of the infelicities associated with the revolutionary aspect of avant-gardism. It is interesting to see the terms which *are* used: 'modern art', of course; 'modernist tendencies', 'modernist interpretations'. The tone is established in talk of 'the relation of modern expression to twentieth-century civilisation', and what is perhaps the keynote is struck by deploying the concept (inherited from Fry) of the 'modern master'. Such a figure is of course on a par with the venerated 'Old Masters', and by the same token, his patrons will be on a par with theirs. The status of it all is driven home in a reclamation of the Fauves from their troublesome nickname. Twenty-five years on they can be enjoyed for their 'matured powers', and 'celebrated not defiantly, not rebelliously, but with dignity and confidence'. As if it should be a comfort – and it probably would to MOMA's Board of Trustees – one may rest in the knowledge that 'even the ultramodernists of 1929 . . . are adequately rewarded financially'. The cat however really comes out of the bag when we are reassured what this newly socially acceptable figure is *not*. What he is not, though he is sometimes still called it 'by the obtuse' is 'madman, degenerate and (more absurdly) bolshevik' (Barr, 1986, pp. 73–6). As Barr remarked in 1934, and one can almost see a despairing shake of the head, modern art remains 'recurrently a matter for debate . . . a banner for the progressive, a red flag for the conservative' (Barr, 1986, pp. 66–8).

In a word, by museumizing modern art, MOMA saves it from communism, or to put it more generally, for it is not quite as one-sided as this, from 'extremism'. In this connection it is worth remarking on the context when Barr *does* make glancing use of the concept of the avant-garde, as he did in 1936 in his catalogue to the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*. This exhibition offered the

essential map of the modern movement which, however much its terms have subsequently been questioned, still functions as a kind of benchmark, pro or con: Cézanne begat Cubism, which begat abstract art, etc. In his catalogue Barr uses our term, or rather its cognates, twice; and both times the context is Russia. He writes of the abstract painter Kandinsky that, 'During and after the war Kandinsky lived in Russia where he participated in vanguard exhibitions' (Barr, 1974, pp. 66–8); and more generally, he notes that, 'Highly cultured Bolsheviks, such as Trotsky and Lunacharsky, understood and supported the artists of the advance guard' (Barr, 1974, p. 16).

Clement Greenberg and *Partisan Review*

It is clear that what was emerging as mainstream English-language writing on modern art during the 1910s, 20s and 30s largely resisted using the concept of the avant-garde, even though it had come into currency by then and even though the idea behind it was quite widespread. Instead of the dynamic and revolutionary connotations of avant-gardism, a more static reading was put forward of 'modern masters' and 'modern masterpieces' that could stand comparison with the canonical achievements of the past. The dominant motif for most of those who wanted to take modern art seriously was continuity, not revolutionary leadership and certainly not a revolutionary break with the past.

Although there is a sense of sanitization at work here, it is not a crude move which is being made. For though modern art is prised away from its Leftist associations, Barr's *Cubism and Abstract Art* is by no means divested of a politics. As he remarks in his Introduction, 'This essay and exhibition might well be dedicated to those painters of squares and circles who have suffered at the hands of philistines with political power' (Barr, 1974, p. 18). This is a crucial moment in the evolution of twentieth-century ideological alignments, and it is a moment whose impact extends far beyond art, though art has been an area heavily implicated in its repercussions. It is the time when capitalism is defined as 'moderate', and its competitors – ideologically diverse as they may be – are equated as 'extreme'. It is the time when Left and Right – communism and fascism – are assimilated together and distinguished from the Centre; the moment when socialism, anarchism and communism as the variegated opposition to an overwhelmingly conservative capitalism (of which militarism, fascism and nazism represent the limit points) are replaced by the simple opposition of 'totalitarianism' versus 'democracy'. This fundamental shift paves the way for the subsequent reintroduction, during the Cold War period, of a very different discourse of 'avant-gardism': as the signifier, not of an oppositional or revolutionary anarchism or socialism, but of bourgeois, capitalist democracy and its central ideological totem, 'the individual'.

One text, above all, established the provenance for the subsequent use of the concept of the avant-garde to define the whole international movement and in

particular its American leading edge after the Second World War; and on the strength of that, to license its retrospective application back over the entire modern period as far as Romanticism. That text was Clement Greenberg's 'Avant-garde and kitsch' published in the New York journal *Partisan Review* in the Fall of 1939. He writes: 'a part of Western bourgeois society has produced something unheard of heretofore: avant-garde culture'. Greenberg notes that 'the birth of the avant-garde coincided chronologically – and geographically too – with the first bold development of scientific revolutionary thought in Europe'. Yet he then goes on to make the crucial conceptual move of detaching this artistic avant-garde from the process of revolutionary development: 'it is true that once the avant-garde had succeeded in "detaching" itself from society, it proceeded to turn round and repudiate revolutionary politics as well as bourgeois. The revolution was left inside society.' The avant-garde becomes the culture of an intellectually, and perhaps even ethically, dissident fraction of the middle class. In a memorable phrase, Greenberg remarks that through economic necessity (for no art can be produced without economic support) the avant-garde remained tied to 'the rich and the cultivated' by 'an umbilical cord of gold'. For Greenberg, the mission of the avant-garde is 'to create art and literature of a high order', and that eclipses all other agendas, including revolutionary social change. All the avant-garde can do socially is keep cultural value alive, as it were in a strongroom, deliberately closed off from 'the welter of ideological struggle' which in Greenberg's view threatened to reduce all value to the level of 'kitsch' (Greenberg, 1939).

Together with its immediate successor, 'Towards a newer Laocoön', published in the same magazine in 1940, these early essays laid the basis for Greenberg himself to attain a position of eminence in the world of American art. Insofar as New York came to supplant Paris as the capital of international Modernism, Greenberg became a cultural arbiter on a world scale. Yet in 1939, Greenberg's meditations on the avant-garde would not have had many readers at all. *Partisan Review* was a classic 'little magazine'. The argument obviously resonated however, and very quickly 'Avant-garde and kitsch' was taken up and reprinted in the more widely circulated, and more mainstream, liberal periodical *Horizon*. It is appropriate here to consider the distinction Baudelaire first made in the 1840s between the two sides of art, the 'contingent' and the 'universal', as signifying a tension inherent in the modern movement since its origin. It is as if what Greenberg's particular concept of the avant-garde achieved, albeit temporarily, within the terms of a specific historical conjuncture, was finally to yoke together the by no means obviously compatible ideas of cultural dynamism and lasting value. It goes without saying that, ideologically, this fitted post-war capitalism like a glove.

It is no idle question to ask, then, precisely where Greenberg got it from. As we have seen, he did not get it from Alfred Barr and Roger Fry, then the two most influential writers on art in the English language. The concept of the avant-garde was kept at arm's length by those who would establish modern art as itself

canonical, the heir to the classical canon, no less. It had too many links with those who fancied consigning the bourgeoisie to the 'dustbin of history', as Trotsky bluntly put it. But on the other side, from the late 1920s onwards Soviet communism became the property of the Stalinist bureaucracy, and as far as art went, that meant the end of the revolutionary avant-garde and the rise of Socialist Realism. The concept of the avant-garde, so to speak, got shot at from both sides. The canonizers of the modern movement did not like it because of its revolutionary affiliations. But because it had also been identified with the radical movements which had grown up *within* the fractures of bourgeois society, the emergent Soviet bureaucracy had no time for it either. In sum, neither the bourgeois apologists of the 'modern movement', nor its orthodox communist critics, produced a literature on which Greenberg could readily have drawn for his concept of the avant-garde.

Partisan Review began publication in 1934 and was almost immediately embroiled in the ideological conflicts which accompanied the policy shift in the international communist movement from the 'Third Period' to the 'Popular Front'. The Third Period was a time of militant proletarianism, which set 'class against class'. It was driven by Soviet domestic policies aimed at building 'Socialism in One Country' – policies such as the collectivization of agriculture and the Five-Year Plans – but internationally it was marked by a rhetoric of 'Proletarian Culture'. The fledgling American Communist Party had organized John Reed Clubs (named after the author of *Ten Days That Shook The World*, the eyewitness account that had brought the Revolution to widespread notice) to promote the spread of proletarian culture: fiction, poetry, critical writing and to a lesser extent the visual arts, on working-class themes and whenever possible by working-class authors and artists. *Partisan Review* labelled itself the John Reed Club of New York.

However, faced by the rise of Hitler, the communist parties changed tack in the mid-1930s, and began to build cultural alliances with the bourgeois organizations they had hitherto denounced, in a 'Popular Front' against fascism. Leftism, tendentious art and proletarian culture were now in their turn denounced in favour of 'realism' and 'human values'. In *Partisan Review* in 1936 Harold Rosenberg reviewed a biography of John Reed using the term 'avant-garde' in relatively conventional communist style to derogate bourgeois art. On Rosenberg's account, Reed had 'emerged from the avant-guard [sic] movement in art and literature', which was 'the anarchistic psychological shadow of an active liberal reformism, based in turn upon the energetic and aimless well being of the middle class' (Rosenberg, 1936, pp. 28–9).

The pressure of keeping up with the twists and turns of Stalinist realpolitik eventually got too much for *Partisan Review* and the first phase of its publication ceased in October 1936. It then re-emerged in December 1937 proclaiming its independence from the Communist Party. Over the next two years, that is, to the time of Greenberg's debut, the journal became more Trotskyist in its allegiances. This is reflected in the editorial content – which included more than one

swingeing denunciation of the Popular Front 'Writers Congesses' organized by the Party in New York in the late 1930s, on the basis of European and Soviet models held in Paris and Moscow. The process culminates in the Fall of 1938 in the publication of the 'Manifesto: For a Free Revolutionary Art' under the names of André Breton and Diego Rivera but largely composed by Trotsky himself. In it, the USSR is described as 'a twilight of filth and blood', and state intervention in art is contrasted with the need for 'complete freedom for art'. The manifesto does not employ the term 'avant-garde', though the underlying idea is not far away from assertions such as: 'We believe that the supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution.' What is noteworthy however, given the sense of 'avant-gardism' that was shortly to be articulated by Greenberg, is that a free art with a key social role is explicitly contrasted with 'a so-called pure art which generally serves the extremely impure ends of reaction' (Breton, Rivera and Trotsky, 1938, pp. 49–53).

It is clear that Greenberg accords a qualitatively different status to the concept of the avant-garde than do his predecessors. On the one hand, the sense Greenberg makes of it is quite distinct both from orthodox Leftist thought and from liberal bourgeois criticism, for both of which the term carried negative connotations, albeit for almost entirely opposed reasons. But, on the other hand, Greenberg's conception also departs from the conventional understanding of the term in the only tradition where it did have much currency: the diffuse tradition of anarchism and the contested hinterland of dissident anti-Stalinist Marxism. There the idea is still tied to a sense of wider political commitments from which Greenberg was shortly – and self-consciously – to divorce it. And it was as a manifestation of that tradition that the concept did appear in the pages of *Partisan Review* in the months before the appearance of 'Avant-garde and kitsch' (1939).

The years 1938–9 saw the publication of a major study of the Soviet cinema by Dwight Macdonald, who had earlier translated the Trotsky/Breton/Rivera 'Manifesto'. Throughout this text, Macdonald *did* use the term 'avant-garde'. And we know, unequivocally, that Greenberg read it, because he takes issue with one of Macdonald's claims in 'Avant-garde and kitsch' itself. Macdonald uses the term in a more conventional 'Trotskyist' way than Greenberg, to denote the simultaneously artistically and politically radical movements which constituted the Soviet art sphere in the wake of the October Revolution. Thus: 'The 1917 revolution, sweeping aside the lumber of the old order, opened a wide field to avant-garde art.' These he then lists as 'Mayakovsky and the LEF group in literature, Malievich and Kandinsky in painting, the formalist and the constructivist schools of architecture, Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Dovschenko in the cinema, Tairov and Meyerhold in the theatre'. Later in the essay he generalizes this, arguing that the Russian developments were based 'on another phase of European culture: the avant-garde tendencies of futurism, dadaism, expressionism, surrealism etc.'; tendencies which, as Macdonald notes, shared the language

of 'the intelligentsia of Europe and America' (Macdonald, 1938, pp. 80–95). It is clear that the concept of an avant-garde was current in dissident Marxist circles in New York in the late 1930s. And insofar as this was an international tendency, one might speculate that at least the *idea*, if not the word, had some currency in those circles generally. Macdonald did not make it up.

A second thing that is evident however is that the tendency which the concept pointed to was in serious difficulties, if not dead. The Nazis were in the process of extirpating the avant-garde in western Europe. The Stalinists had finished it off in the Soviet Union, and their international organization, the Popular Front, had little time for avant-gardism. This crisis in the concept of the avant-garde becomes clear if we look at the *Partisan Review* editorial for the issue of Summer 1939, that is, the one immediately preceding the publication of 'Avant-garde and kitsch'. Its tone is set by the title: 'Twilight of the thirties'. In the text, Philip Rahv writes, 'For more than a hundred years literature, on a world scale, was in the throes of constant inner revolution, was the arena of uninterrupted rebellions and counter rebellions, was incessantly renewing itself both in substance and in form. But at present it seems as if this magnificent process is drawing to a close.' For Rahv, 'There still are remnants, but no avant-garde movement to speak of exists any longer.' They are in the grip of a 'reactionary Zeitgeist', and the condition of art reflects 'the two great political catastrophes of our epoch: the victories of fascism and the defeat of the Bolshevik revolution'. Rahv asks, 'Is there a basis for a new vanguard group whose members, not frightened by isolation, know how to swim against the current?' But in 1939, the answer is negative: 'I do not believe that a new avant-garde movement, in the proper historical sense of the term, can be formed in this pre-war situation' (Rahv, 1939, pp. 3–15).

Rahv refers to 'the proper historical sense of the term', and he clearly means it to signify a radical art with a radical social role. Insofar as there can be said to be a 'proper' sense of such an ambivalent and contested concept, it is one that embraces both aspects of the term. What Greenberg does in 'Avant-garde and kitsch' and in 'Towards a newer Laocoön' is, quite strategically, to take *one* of those strands of meaning and make it over as *the* meaning. There is a certain defensive logic to Greenberg's move, made on the eve of a second world war, and at the moment of the apparent triumph of Fascism and Stalinism in Europe, symbolized in the Nazi-Soviet Pact. What he could not have foreseen however, as he wrote his essay in the summer of 1939, was that in the next five years the entire map of cultural and political forces would change, on a world scale. The Left tradition out of which he wrote was about to reach a terminus. When the train of the avant-garde next pulled out of the station, the lines were going to be pointing in a very different direction. The day of Modernism, with a capital M, was about to dawn. As Clement Greenberg himself put it in 1960: 'some day it will have to be told how "anti-Stalinism", which started out more or less as "Trotskyism", turned into art for art's sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come' (Greenberg, 1961, p. 230).

Avant-Gardism Contested

With benefit of hindsight the long arc from the aftermath of the French Revolution up to the late 1960s can be seen as the epoch of the avant-garde, a time when the clash of meanings attributed to the term counted for something. In the 1840s when Baudelaire first wrote of the two halves of art, on the one side the fleeting and contingent, the imperative to address contemporary history or to become empty and irrelevant, and on the other the legacy of value, the timeless, the permanent, the sense of standards which art must keep before itself if it is not to lapse into triviality and entertainment, he prefigured the clash of some of the defining stereotypes of the modern movement: Realism and Modernism; aesthetics and politics. The concept of the avant-garde slips across these boundaries, now in one guise, now in another: the avant-gardist at one moment the agitator using art as a lever to topple the status quo, at another the aesthete careless of commitment, eyes fixed on the horizon of eternity. Yet in the closing decades of the twentieth century a new note was struck. In the wake of 1968, radical cultural historians like Peter Bürger and T. J. Clark rewrote the history of the avant-garde, reinscribing the politics which Modernism had effectively erased. But the moment of the New Left in the 1960s was itself to prove transitional, on the way to a deeper questioning of the idea of avant-gardism as such in the period now conventionally referred to as 'postmodern'. When Greenberg sketched the lineage of his notion of the Modernist avant-garde, he located its impulse in the philosophy of Kant. It is in some senses then not surprising to discover that when Enlightenment ideals themselves have been called into question, when the 'grand narratives' of truth, justice and beauty have been claimed as the masks of self-interested men, the very notion of an avant-garde has been rejected.

That which is 'in advance' (*en avant*) has to be in advance of *something.* For long it was a commonplace that various types of modern art represent ideas and forms of consciousness, and indeed forms of social relationships which were in important respects *ahead of* the characteristic beliefs and norms of the wider society. In the present period, these underlying assumptions of progress and of a single way forward for society which far-sighted people can recognize, have themselves been fundamentally questioned. One of the consequences of this has been a no less fundamental questioning of the very principle of avant-gardism in the arts: not only of the particular inflections which the avant-garde assumed in modern Western societies, but the whole notion of leadership as it is implicit in the concept right back to its origins. Thus a feminist historian, sensitive both to the gender inequality internal to the practice of avant-gardism itself, and to the complicity, witting or otherwise, of the modern movement in the arts in the wider structures of Western imperialism, has written scathingly of avant-garde 'apartheid' (Nelson and Shiff, 1996, p. 165). While that position may not be universally shared, another historian is on firm ground when she writes that 'to

designate a movement 'avant-garde' is surely no longer to bestow an accolade' (Ward, 1996, p. 2).

What has happened is that the idea of the avant-garde has become a casualty of the conceptual earthquake that has demolished the edifice of Modernism. One consequence of this is that those who continue to use the term without thinking are living, whether they know it or not, in Modernism's ruins. But what remains open is the question of whether some conceptual refashioning of the notion of an 'avant-garde' can retain its usefulness as a means of critical leverage against the ever more dominating normal forms of the mediafied and commodified cultures of contemporary capitalism. It was in this register that Hal Foster rehearsed the litany of charges against the avant-garde: 'the ideology of progress, the presumption of originality, the elitist hermeticism . . . the appropriation by the culture industry, and so on'. Despite all this, however, Foster's point was that the idea 'remains a crucial coarticulation of artistic and political forms', and that, by extension, it remains a worthwhile intellectual and critical task to 'complicate its past and support its future' (Foster, 1996, p. 5). However problematic, the notion of an avant-garde represents an idea in terms of which the practice of modern art has been related to society at large. It is an open question whether it remains a useful device for thinking these relationships, or whether it is the symptom of a past that art and society alike have now travelled beyond.

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Chapter 18

On the Intention of Modern(ist) Art

Fred Orton

> If we wanted to say something about art that we could be quite certain was true, we might settle for the assertion that art is intentional. And by this we would mean that art is something we do, that works of art are things that human beings make. And the truth of this assertion is in no way challenged by such discoveries, some long known, others freshly brought to light, as that we cannot produce a work of art to order, that improvisation has its place in the making of a work of art, that the artist is not necessarily the best interpreter of his work, that the spectator has a legitimate role to play in the organization of what he perceives.
>
> *Richard Wollheim*, The Work of Art as Object, p. 112

> Unfortunately, everything I do is intentional!
>
> *Jasper Johns*, Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews, p. 104

Intention has been a lively and important issue in literary theory and criticism at least since the publication, in 1946, of W. M. Wimsatt's and M. C. Beardsley's essay 'The intentional fallacy'. Controversial in its day, even now 'The intentional fallacy' offers much food for thought, but it requires more careful reading than it perhaps received when it was first published. Wimsatt and Beardsley wrote in opposition to the legacy of Romantic aesthetics which, they claimed, privileged intention when it came to judging poetry, particularly lyric poetry. While granting that a poem is an intentional act, they argued that its author's intention should not be used as a standard by which to value it. Wimsatt and Beardsley also wrote in opposition to the emphasis on subjectivity that criticism had inherited from the Romantics. The procedures of literary criticism had to be dissociated from those of literary biography. As far as they were concerned, once a poem had been published it was public property. On publication, the poem came before the critics whose job was to judge it, as far as possible, without reference to what they knew about its author's life, psychology and historical context.

Wimsatt's and Beardsley's 'The intentional fallacy' is an argument about evaluation not meaning. At one point in the fourth section of the essay, where

they puzzle the idea that 'there is a difference between internal and external evidence for the meaning of a poem', they have interesting things to say about how poems might be interpreted, but their main concern is with evaluation not interpretation. The idea – almost a conventional wisdom now – that the 'intentional fallacy' refers to or applies to any kind of work of art rather than only to poetry, and that it is an argument about interpretation – that it maintains that interpretation should be concerned with only what can be read or seen to be the case without reference to the author's purpose – came later as either, at worst, a careless reading of Wimsatt's and Beardsley's essay or, at best, with American New Criticism, an extension of its concern with value judgement to new ways of understanding balance, contrast, rhetorical structure and so on.

Whatever you might think about 'The intentional fallacy' and the arguments it provoked about the irrelevance or relevance of intention in the valuation and interpretation of literary texts, for over fifty years intention has been an issue in literary theory and criticism in a way that it rarely has been in art theory and criticism. Which is not to say that art theorists and critics have not been aware of the 'intentional fallacy' or some extension of it or that intention hasn't had its moments in art theory and criticism. But those moments have been few and far between.

With regard to the modern or Modernist work of art broadly conceived, 'intention' is the determining desire or force and structuring process that makes an object that will effect a meaning in its beholder. Which is not to say that intention and meaning are the same thing. They're not. Intention and meaning are opposites which language tries to unite. Intention is always directed towards meaning but it is not the meaning. Meaning is always to some extent intentional but it cannot be reduced to the intention that occasioned its material signifier.

The beginning of Richard Wollheim's essay of 1970 'The work of art as object' serves me very well in so far as it suggests a route to follow for what I want to say. And Jasper Johns's *Flag*, 1954–5 (MOMA, New York; see plates 18.1 and 18.2), a work of extraordinary sensual and cognitive value that for over twenty years has marked the progress of my art history almost in the manner that it has marked the progress of Johns's art practice, is such an exemplary object with which to consider the role of intention in the production of the modern or Modernist work of art that I would be foolish if I ignored it here (see Orton, 1994, pp. 89–146).

To those persons who asked him why he made *Flag* or how he came to make it or what it meant, Johns first replied that he 'intuitively' liked to paint flags (cited in Anon., 1958, p. 96). Afterwards, he would reply, and thereafter always reply along the same lines, that he 'dreamed one night of painting a large flag' or that '[he] had a dream, in which [he] painted a picture of a big Stars and Stripes' (see Solomon, 1964; Tono, 1997a, p. 99). It seems that he told one or two close friends about the dream, and one or the other or both of them thought that it presented him with a good idea for a painting. After that, he went out and bought the materials with which to begin. And began. 'Beginning' is important.

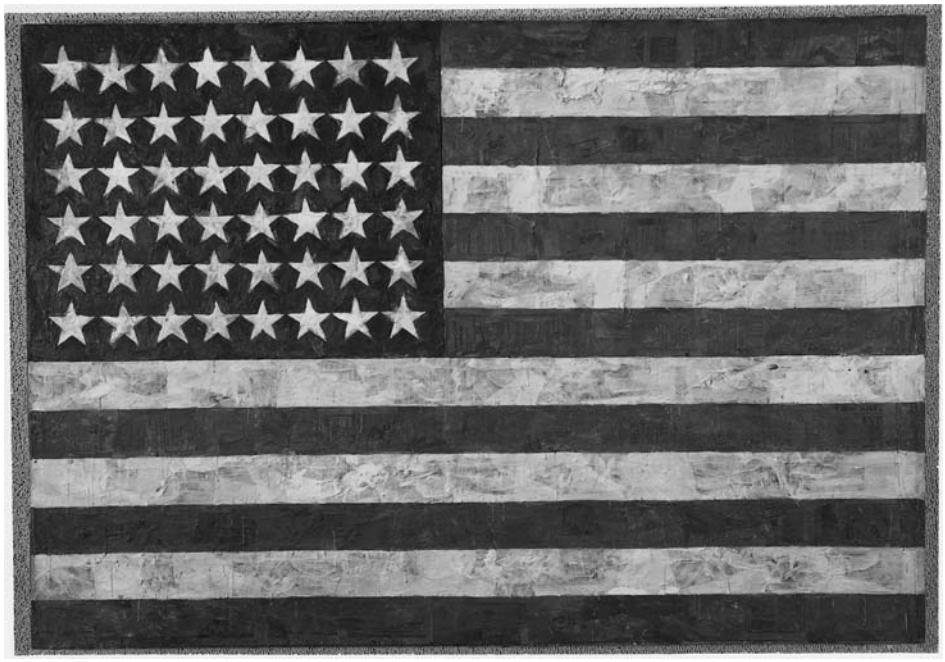


Plate 18.1 Jasper Johns, *Flag*, 1954–5, encaustic, oil and collage on fabric mounted on plywood, 107.3 × 153.8 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Philip Johnson in honour of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Photograph © 2002. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © Jasper Johns/VAGA, New York/DACS, London 2002

That's the 'story'. We can use it to puzzle intention so long as we keep in mind that it's a representation of an intention and don't confuse it with what Johns intended or with what he made when he made *Flag*. In this sense, the story is but one effect of *Flag*, an effect that need not and should not be ignored when considering what Johns's intentions were when he made *Flag*. The story of the dream is in discourse already signifying something, and somehow it has to be dealt with. I'll return to it in a moment.

> If I wanted to say something about art that we could be quite certain was true, we might settle for the assertion that it is intentional. And by this we would mean that art is something we do, that works of art are things that human beings make.
>
> *Richard Wollheim*, The Work of Art as Object, p. 112

This makes a distinction between an intentional object and a natural object. Whereas works of art are made of imagined and invented time, place and form, natural objects have not been invented; their formal, spatial and temporal characters are, as it were, given (De Man, 1989, p. 110). Though, according to the 'intentional fallacy', works of art might be judged as natural objects, they could



Plate 18.2 Jasper Johns, *Flag* (detail), 1954–5.

only be so judged on the sole basis of their sensual appearances; that is to say, by ignoring their character as kinds of statements (ibid., p. 110 and De Man, 1983a, pp. 23–4).

According to Wollheim, because works of art are things that human beings make they must be made according to a concept or various descriptions of the qualities, features and characteristics that make the work of art what it is (Wollheim, 1973, pp. 113–17). There will be a hierarchy among these concepts or descriptions that regulates the production of the work of art. At different periods and under different conditions the relations that hold within the concept will be felt or thought to change. Modern works of art are somewhat different from pre-modern works of art. According to the dominant theory of modern art, as Wollheim understood it in 1970, the material character of the work has to be emphasized. With regard to painting, the concept or description requires that the surface has to be asserted or insisted on and used to effect in the beholder a sense and cognition of what the painter felt and knew.

Works of art, especially modern or Modernist works of art, are different from other things that human beings make. The act of making a work of art, especially the act of making a modern or Modernist work of art, involves an intention and a concept or description different from that of making – to cite an example used by Michael Baxandall – a bridge where everything, including the designer's sense of expression and beauty, has to be subordinated to the inten-

tion of spanning and facilitating movement across a gap (Baxandall, 1985, pp. 12–40). Another example, directly relevant to Johns's *Flag*, is provided by the Stars and Stripes, an intentional object whose manufacture is controlled by a description of its colours, size, proportions and situation of its elements that can only be altered or amended by law and that is subordinated to the legally controlled intention of facilitating the demonstration, affirmation and celebration of citizenship, loyalty and patriotism. Art is both an intentional act and an intentional object but it is not, as it is with designing and making the Stars and Stripes or a bridge, subordinated to another act that exists beyond the intention of making it. Here I come in line with those persons who have argued that the modern artist makes a work of art with no intention other than that of making it, where the process or activity of making it constitutes a closed structure, autonomous of whatever use might be made of it after it has been made (De Man, 1983a, pp. 25–6). For example: selling it. The artist might well have the intention of selling the work of art once he or she has done making it but that intention must exist beyond the intention of making it. To understand works of art in this way is not to insist, as New Criticism insisted, on the idea of the 'self-sufficiency' of the work of art: that the production and consumption of a work of art is independent or autonomous of reference to the world outside its structure and form, that it has no relation to the base forces and relations of production. Rather, to insist on the way the artist works the sensuous materials of the modern or Modernist work of art according to no other intention but to make it, is to insist that the process or activity of making and the work of art that results from that activity reflects back on the artist and enables or might enable an acute form of 'self-understanding' or *self-consciousness* (ibid., pp. 31–2 and De Man, 1983b, p. 39).

One would, however, not want to claim that the process of making a modern or Modernist work of art is thoroughly different from other kinds of labour, but there is a need to understand it in its difference as a specific kind of labour. The labour involved doesn't wholly accord with the kind of labour involved in making a table – to shift to Marx's example of a commodity in Chapter 1, Section 4, of the first volume of *Capital*. No one can deny that, as social beings, those persons who make tables and Modernist works of art will be alienated from the products of their own activity, from nature, each other and from the rest of human society, and thus will have an alienated self-consciousness (see Marx, 1963, pp. 175–85). But to the extent that the process of making a work of art can be kept, with regard to intention, apart from the commodification of the artist's labour and the commodification of what that labour produces, the work of art will be made primarily for the private use of the person making it. (This seems to hold even if the artist buys the labour of others to help in the process of making; the Modernist artist perforce must make the work of art with commodities, material goods and/or the actual labour of others.) That is to say that the artist making the work of art does not relate to the use- and exchange-value of the process of making what he makes and the object that is brought into being by that labour in the

same way that the person who makes or contributes to the making of a table relates to it and to the division of labour (in the extended workshop). Labour is alienated in the production of a Modernist work of art but in as much as the labour involved is not external to the artist; is voluntary and not forced; primarily satisfies his needs and is not primarily a means of satisfying the needs of others; it is his labour and not labour for someone else – it belongs to him and not to another person (ibid., pp. 177–8; taking from Marx on the alienation of labour in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844). The process of making a Modernist work of art contains a 'utopian' dimension in so far as it suggests purposeful labour directed by an individual. Rather than constituting a denial of the artist's nature, both the process of making the work of art and the work of art itself belong to it, are of it. Because of this the process of making a work of art and the work of art itself may give its producer a glimpse of what thoroughly unalienated production might be like and also, perhaps, a glimpse of an unalienated self – a glimpse of that time when what it is to be an individual human being will escape characterization by the division of society into mutually independent and conflicting spheres of activity (economy, politics, law, arts, religion and so on), and labour into mental and manual labour. This idea may be no more than a fiction but, if so, we can take it as a practical fiction that's useful for going on because it enables a not unreasonable degree of optimism in a state of considerable pessimism. It permits the possibility that an unalienated self has not been completely closed down.

Modern or Modernist art is an intentional act and object of a mind that would know its self. The work of art comes in place of a self's yearning for knowledge of itself and though it cannot be reduced to the intention that brought it into being, and certainly not to the artist's statement as to what brought it into being, the process or activity of making and understanding it maintains itself as a process of self-consciousness. More on this later.

At this juncture I want to return to Johns's statement of intent as it was represented in the several versions of his story of the dream. When Johns saw his dream into published discourse, he did so in ways that show that he may not have been clear about what he was doing in it. Remember, on one occasion, he said that he 'dreamed one night of painting a large flag' and, on another occasion, that '[he] had a dream in which [he] painted a picture of a big Stars and Stripes'. Was he, in his dream, dreaming the intention of painting, *or* was he at work engaged in the activity of painting; was he, in his dream, dreaming about doing something, *or* was he, in his dream, doing that something; was he dreaming the intention of making *or* was he making either a large flag with paint *or* painting a picture of one? Was the object that, in the dream, he was intending to make, or was making, a work of art, something insubordinate and self-conscious, *or* was it a flag, an object seemingly without self-consciousness and subordinate to another intention? The different stories of the dream are intriguing. They effect an uncertainty, irresolvable either by the analysis of grammar or by an appeal for

some kind of secondary revision, about what kind of object it was that was there in the dream and which, subsequently, became *Flag*.

Awake and in the studio making *Flag*, Johns blurred the distinction between making an object under the concept 'flag' (and making a large Stars and Stripes with paint) and making an object under the concept 'painting' (and painting a picture of a big Stars and Stripes). From the moment that he hit on the idea of having the Stars and Stripes provide the structure and form for the way he was to assert and use the surface of his painting, making the one congruent with the other, the idea of painting a picture of a big Stripes was compromised. What Johns was doing was more like making the flag of the United States of America than painting a picture of one.

The concepts or descriptions that organize *Flag* merge in a constant and provocative exchange of attributes in a way that causes problems for anyone who is concerned to fix its meaning. *Flag* is neither a painting nor a flag but both a painting and a flag. Whether Johns intended this undecidability or whether it resulted as an effect of how he recollected what he dreamed and took that recollection for an intention, that is what materialized when he made his work congruent with the structure and form of the Stars and Stripes. However, whatever it was that, in his dream, he intended to make or saw himself making, he must have been intending to make or was making it according to some concept or description of what painting was as an activity. And, awake and in the studio, in so far as his intention was to make whatever it was that he intended to make under the concept or description 'painting', according to the dominant theory of modern art as it related to painting, that intention was frustrated in practice.

> [W]e cannot produce a work of art to order . . . improvisation has its place in the making of a work of art.
>
> *Richard Wollheim*, The Work of Art as Object, p. 112

The intention that, in the dream, had been acted on with paint began in actuality with paint also but, then, that medium was abandoned in favour of another medium. Johns began making the object that would become *Flag* with enamel paint on a bed-sheet. But he couldn't make the paint do what he wanted it to do. When he applied the paint, so he says, the second brushstroke smeared the first, unless, of course, he waited for the paint to dry, and the paint took too long to dry. He was a skilled draughtsman and collager, and had developed the knack of taking plaster casts from people, but he was not yet as adept as a painter to the degree that his intention seems to have required. He was either too impatient or not sufficiently competent in asserting and using the surface with enamel paint to succeed with it. Impatience or lack of competence may well have been a determining condition in the production of *Flag* that contributed to Johns's decision to stop working with enamel and change to wax.[1] Hot wax dries very quickly. As soon as one stroke cooled and hardened he could make another without altering

the first. Splashes, drips and dribbles round out as they dry, like enamel paint does but more so, just like melted wax runs down a candle. He found the medium very easy to use and adapted it to his collage technique, dipping cut and torn pieces of newsprint into hot pigmented wax – red, blue and white – and fixing them to the fabric before the wax cooled and hardened. In other words, *Flag*'s surface has been built from bits of collage material which were laid side by side and over each other and stuck in place with hot coloured wax. Some areas also include the use of paint and brush. The two ways of applying paint, with material dipped into hot coloured wax or with brushes, have equal value and follow no particular sequence. *Flag*, then, this object that is neither flag nor painting but both flag and painting is also, in terms of its facture, neither painting nor collage but both painting and collage.

In coming to make *Flag* like this, in a way that was not quite painting yet not quite its travesty or negation, something happened to the surface – to the fact that, according to the dominant theory of modern art, a painting has a surface and that that surface has to be both asserted and used – for the process that made it might best be characterized not as a way of asserting and using a surface but as a way of making a surface. The fact of the canvas as surface, undergoing the action of wax, paint and collage matter, almost disappears as something prior that has been asserted and used. Here, wax, paint and collage matter make the shapes of the stars and stripes in much the same way that the discrete pieces of fabric that make the flag of the United States of America do not assert and use a surface but construct the surface, construct the Stars and Stripes.

That was not all that there was to making *Flag* but that description is sufficient for this discussion of intention. Almost. I need to point to one more aspect of its making. A year or so after Johns had thought that he had finished working on *Flag*, he put it on display on a temporary wall in his studio, and someone, at a party, leaned against the wall, and knocked the wall over. *Flag* was damaged and had to be repaired. The repair was made with then current newspapers. *Flag*, begun at the end of 1954 and worked on in 1955, was completed – we can tell this from the date of the newspaper used for the repair – on or after 15 February 1956. Johns made the repair in harmony with what was there prior to the damage but in such a way that attention was drawn to that bit of the surface as being of another intention, as of an intention not only to heal the surface but also to mark the place of hurt. The manner of *Flag*'s completion, far removed from the intention that brought it into being, was almost unforeseeable and thoroughly contingent.

It has been claimed that though intention is never inconsistent with method, intention may well be in conflict or at variance with method (Said, 1985, p. 13). Leaving aside the question of what it was that, in the dream, Johns was intending to make or was making, when he began making the object that became *Flag* his intention, as it transpired, was at odds with the intention of making it with enamel paint on fabric. The activity of making a work of art – the relation between intention, method and object – depends not only on the foreseeable but

also on a multiplicity of more or less unforeseeable actions and events, affects and effects. If Johns intended to do so, he did not eventually paint a picture of a flag. And though he began making *Flag* with enamel paint on fabric, under a concept or description 'painting', he eventually made it with wax, paint and collage material and in such a way that he invented a new medium and also a new surface – something that until recently evaded description. Then having made it, *Flag* was subsequently damaged and repaired in a significantly vivid and affective way. The intentional act that makes a modern or Modernist work of art, unlike that of making the flag of the United States of America, is not an inner image that can be exactly externalized, reproduced or re-presented in practice according to a concept or description or a set of legal instructions.

Pictorial meaning is conveyed in sensual experience. The artist makes the work of art to effect an experience and meaning in the work's beholder. That experience and meaning must be made to try to match the intention that motivated the artist to make the work of art. The artist, of course, is the first beholder of his work. As the artist makes the work he must continually match his experience and interpretation of what he is doing and bringing into being against the intention that motivated him to begin making what he is making (see Wollheim, 1975, pp. 101–4). He sees, feels, smells, hears and explains to himself what he is doing and tries to make sure that the experience – especially the visual and tactile experience – he has and the interpretation that he makes of the work of art while he is making it is attuned to the intention that was acted on when he began making it. Sense perception or experience and cognition are in an interdependent relation with intention in the process of making a work of art which is one of continuous adjustment and readjustment between the intention that motivated it and what is being brought into being, between what was desired and what is achieved. In the process of making *Flag*, each added piece of collage matter, each brushstroke, drip and dribble of wax, each text and touch, would have modified what was already in place and partly determined what had to be put in place. Once in place, some matter would have been left there, other matter would have been removed, or amended, and so on. Though the process that made *Flag* was to a certain extent serendipitous and contingent, everything that makes it what it is, whether before or after the event, was intended. With each addition and subtraction and so on *Flag* would have been a different thing, and Johns would have been in a different situation or relation with it. In other words, the intention that made the object that became *Flag* effected a train of developing sensual and cognitive moments of intention. The intention that makes the modern or Modernist work of art is, in this sense, always an intention-in-progress up to and including the moment when the artist decides, for whatever reasons, that the work is finished: when, according to Johns, the artist has 'no other suggestions to make in the painting, no more energy to rearrange things, no more energy to see it differently' (Johns, 1965; see also Johns, 1997, p. 114). Although the artist's intention is not actualized in the work of art, nevertheless, as the moving, organizing or structuring force, some trace of it will end up within the work of art –

somewhat modified by it and much less commanding of it than one might think – both effecting and constraining one's experience and interpretation of it.[2]

> [T]he artist is not necessarily the best interpreter of his work, . . . the spectator has a legitimate role to play in the organization of what he perceives.
>
> *Richard Wollheim*, The Work of Art as Object, p. 112

Asking the artist about what his work of art means, or about what his intention was in making it, is unlikely to provide a reassuring answer to either question. If, for example, the artist had said, 'My intention was so and so', would he necessarily have meant that quite seriously? Would he necessarily have meant it? Think of the way that Johns said that he intuitively liked to paint flags. 'The most explicit expression of intention is by itself insufficient evidence of intention' (Wittgenstein, 1953, 641). Think of Johns's story of the dream. Would the artist necessarily know what his intention was or what his work of art meant? Think of the undecidability of Johns's *Flag* and the seemingly uncertain intention that was there in the story of the dream. The work of art might resist the artist's efforts to know it or the intention that was acted on to bring it to its mode of being. Sometimes, given the complex, labile character of the move from intention to the work of art, the artist may be more or less nonplussed by what he has made. In which case a spectator other than the artist may well reach an understanding of the work and its intention that the artist may then want to accept and go on with. This way of a modern artist coming to an understanding of his intention and its meaning may well be more often the case than we have hitherto realized. Indeed, far from being exceptional, it might be the norm.

There are artists; there are intentions; there are conscious and unconscious purposes. Artists can and do sometimes speak or write their intentions but, as I said, such statements are unlikely to be reassuring or sufficient for coming to terms with the work. Sometimes artists do not let us know their intentions. Whether they do or not, close attention to the material substance of the work of art will enable a glimpse of the intention that brought it to its mode of being. And that glimpsed intention can – must – be placed in relation with whatever the artist has said concerning his or her intention. In a sense, both intentions, the intention that is put into words and the intention that turns up in the work, are translations representing a vanished intention.

The interpretation of a modern or Modernist work of art implies understanding the intention that brought it to its mode of being by attending first and foremost to the relations that make its material substantiality what it is and which exist not in themselves, as if the work of art is a natural object, but for the artist and, because of and after him, for us (De Man, 1983a, p. 29). Coming across Johns's *Flag*, for example, we feel and try to understand how it accords with the concept or description 'flag' and 'painting', and realize that it fits neither and both; we read and understand its texts, and make a kind of sense out of their nonsense; we feel and understand its wealth of texture and touch by imagining

Johns's hand moving and making the surface, matching our sense of his touch to similar forms that we've experienced and understood inside and outside of painting (see Orton, 1994, pp. 110–31).[3] And so on. The epistemological character of interpretation, by no means disinterested, implies and effects a need to understand the intention that brought the work of art into being. Interpretation should proceed not by adding sets of relations to the work but always with regard to what has actually been brought into being by and for the artist and for us. It should also proceed in the knowledge that a work of art, especially a modern or Modernist work of art, is one the most complex objects that human beings make and that it will always resist our best efforts to know it completely (De Man, 1983a, p. 29).

It is here that I want to resume what I began to say about the self-consciousness of the modern or Modernist work of art. As we've seen, the intention to make a work of art is an intention to mean something. 'When one means something, it is oneself meaning' (Wittgenstein, 1953, 456). However, 'if you say: "How am I to know what he means, when I see nothing but the signs he gives?" then I say: "How is he to know what he means, when he has nothing but the signs either"' (ibid., 504). The project is both hermeneutic and semiological: 'Understanding the world of signs is the means of understanding oneself' (see Silverman, 1987, p. 338, citing Ricoeur, 1974, p. 264). The object of artistic intention is self-understanding. That is why I said earlier that the modern or Modernist work of art, broadly conceived, enables an acute form of self-consciousness. When the artist, making a work of art, experiences and interprets what he is making, compares and contrasts it with his intention, he or she is also engaged in a process of making, experiencing and interpreting signs of his or her self. A self experiences and interprets and judges the work of art as it brings that work of art into being. As it does so, and because it does so, a self comes to know itself, if only partially and temporarily. The structuring process of making a work of art is, as it were, a relation-in-process between the constitutive self of the artist and the signs of that self which, as they are put in place, effect a new self that demands further labour and represented translation, feeling and understanding, and so on. The intention to make a modern or Modernist work of art is an intention to inaugurate a structuring process in which and whereby interpretive signs of self-consciousness are brought into being only to be put under erasure. Seen and understood like this, the modern or Modernist work of art appears as but one vivid moment in the continuous process of desiring a self-identity whereby signs of that identity are put in place and displaced, posited and negated, and gone on with.

The beholder of the work of art who is other than the artist who made it is engaged in a complementary process of self-understanding. For her or him, as was the case for the artist, every development in the interpretation of the work of art occasions a development in her or his introspective observing or theorizing and observed or theorized self. In this sense, the artist making, seeing, feeling and understanding his or her work of art and the beholder of the work of art

who is other than the artist who made it share one and the same intention (De Man, 1983b, p. 44).

The intentional act or object that is the modern or Modernist work of art provides us with an allegory of the self's predicament. Though it would know itself, the self is never wholly present in the signs that it makes of and for itself but is always past and future. The process of becoming self-conscious or of trying to achieve self-consciousness that is allegorized in making and interpreting a modern or Modernist work of art, cannot be brought to a conclusion and can only be terminated by that which, as someone put it (I forget who), is beyond the final coma.

I said near the beginning of this essay that 'beginning' is important. There is a relation between *Flag* and Johns's beginning as an artist that makes it appropriate to approach my conclusion with some remarks about intention and beginning. You might think that beginning is easy. But, as Vladimir and Estragon knew: 'it's the start that's difficult. You can start from anything. Yes, but you have to decide.' Sometime in 1954 Johns 'decided to stop becoming and to be an artist' (see Steinberg, 1963, p. 8). At that moment – perhaps it was just before or just after he had started work on *Flag* – he deliberately and methodically destroyed whatever works of art he had in his possession that he had produced before. As far as Johns was concerned, and thereafter art criticism and history also, 'Jasper Johns' began as an artist with *Flag*.

Johns provides us with a good example of an artist who was especially concerned with beginning, by which I mean that he was very aware of the need to establish the material and ideological point at which his art would depart from all other practices and establish relations of difference and continuity with them in such a way that what he produced would provide the main entry for what he as an artist and his art would be. Continuity and difference. Continuity because a work of art must be made under a concept or according to a description of art for it to be recognized and used as art; there must be some degree of continuity. Difference because the artist must distinguish his work of art from all other works of art and to do this he must rethink and practically amend the concept or description he is working with. Indeed, it seems that this is something that all self-consciously modern or Modernist artists must do to be modern or Modernist artists. Establishing a beginning usually involves designating a consequent intent (Said, 1985, p. 5). It establishes an intention-to-be-continued. Even before the method has been decided and tried, there must be at and in the beginning a belief that it will go on, that it will be sustainable in practice (ibid., pp. 47–8).

Johns's *Flag* seems to have been an almost chance event whose value he was able to understand only after he had decided on the intention to locate a beginning. A beginning is a project always already underway (ibid., p. 13). It's begun before you've noticed it. Because of the close relation of beginning and intention, it might be the case that artistic intention is always similarly *in transitu* before it is identified and acted on. This seems to be something that Johns's story of his dream is telling us. In the dream he is intending to paint a large flag *or* is

painting a picture of a big Stars and Stripes. He is intending to make *or* is making the object that he will take as his beginning as an artist. The intention to begin is, in the dream, already in mind *or* has already been acted on and passed to its object. From the residue of a life and a day, some raw material was taken into the dream which must have been Johns's motive for dreaming it. In other words, the signifier of an intention or of 'a (disguised wish or) intention' was present in the dream that gave the dream meaning for Johns (ibid., p. 165, using and commenting on a fragment of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* of 1900). The intention to paint a large flag or the act of painting a picture of a big Stars and Stripes must have been present with Johns as raw material before it passed into the dream. It might well be that the raw matter of an intention is always already there to be made over into an intentional act. The complexity here, with regard to Johns's dream, bearing in mind Freud's work on the interpretation of dreams and dreaming, dream-work and dream-thought, manifest and latent content, and so on, and associating it with the idea that the sign of an intention is always a translation representing an intention, is that the dreamed intention to paint a large flag or the dreamed act of painting a picture of a big Stars and Stripes would be neither about the intention of painting a large flag nor about painting a picture of a big Stars and Stripes. This might tell us another thing about intention: that the object or sign of an intention is always other and sometimes radically other than the intention that inaugurated it. I like very much this remark of Johns's about intention: '[A]t best, one can say that one's intention is so and so, and obviously one does not do exactly what one intends. One does more, usually, and often less, also. Or you could just say one does other' (Fuller, 1997, p. 187).

Notes

1 For an all too brief but interesting consideration of the ways in which matters of authorial intention and competence are often misleadingly isolated from questions about the determining conditions of painting see C. Harrison (1991) *Essays on Art and Language*, Blackwell Publishers, pp. 178–80.

2 Here, for example, are three attempts to characterize the way intention occupies its place within the act or object: (a) Wittgenstein, 1953, 644: 'I am not ashamed of what I did then, but of the intention which I had. – And didn't the intention lie also in what I did?'; (b) J. Derrida (1976) *Of Grammatology*, trans. by G. C. Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 243: 'But in spite of that declared intention, Rousseau's discourse lets itself be constrained by a complexity which always has the form of the supplement of or from the origin. His declared intention is not annulled by this but rather inscribed within a system' (originally published 1967); and (c) T. W. Adorno (1984) *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by C. Lenhardt, Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 217: '[intention] plays the role of a subjective moving force that ends up being submerged in the work' (originally published 1970).

3 See also Richard Shiff's writing on touch, for example 'Constructing physicality', in *Art Journal*, Spring 1991, pp. 42–7 and 'Cézanne's physicality: The politics of touch',

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Chapter 19

Anti-Art and the Concept of Art

Paul N. Humble

The notion of anti-art is one of the most problematic and least understood in the whole of twentieth-century art. There are good reasons for this; the work of Duchamp and other like-minded artists, such as the Dadaists and Conceptual artists, was intended to be problematic and, in the most extreme case, subversive of the institutions, values and practices fundamental to art's existence. Owing to this strong and persistent strain of nihilism, anti-art throws up many questions of interest not merely to the art theorist but to the philosopher as well. In particular, anti-art obliges us to reflect upon our concept of art and those things that can properly be accommodated by it, for not just anything can or should count as art.

The problematic nature of anti-art is best illustrated by a crucial but ambiguous question, which Duchamp jotted down in 1913 when he was in the midst of an artistic crisis. That question was: 'Can one make works which are not works of art?' It can be interpreted in at least three different ways. The first interpretation takes into account Duchamp's dismissal of Modernism as so-called 'retinal' art, i.e. art that placed painterly, formal values before ideas. Thus the question could be formulated as: is it possible to make works that are not 'retinal' works of art but which embody a broader aesthetic? The second interpretation is more radical: is it possible to make works that eschew the aesthetic altogether and are the antithesis of art? The third interpretation gives the question a very different inflection: is it possible for Duchamp to make works that would not, inevitably, be named as art, i.e. could be anything other than art?

It is hardly surprising, then, that the work Duchamp went on to produce between 1913 and 1923 is a mixed bag, and contains both art and anti-art in the strict sense. This sets the philosopher the difficult task of deciding whether a particular work is a piece of art or anti-art. But since the notion of anti-art is very much a contested one, we might arrive at quite different decisions according to the particular theoretical perspective we adopt and how, more generally, we think of and characterize art. Therefore, the remainder of the chapter will discuss the three principal perspectives on anti-art.

An Aesthetic Perspective

The notion that its aesthetic properties (or effects) define a work of art is the most traditional view and, as such, makes a sharp distinction between art and anti-art. It is able, however, to accommodate many of the themes at play in the idea of anti-art. For example, there are works in which chance always plays some part, works with a definitely unusual or bizarre content; works made out of unusual, non-art materials; works apparently devoid of meaning; readymade or found objects; and actions performed overtly in the context of art but which do not result in the production of objects. The first three themes do not raise difficult issues and works illustrative of them, such as Arp's collage *According to the Laws of Chance* (1920) or Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–23) or Schwitters's *Merz* collages, both enrich and enhance the realm of art rather than stand in opposition to it. It is works featuring one or other of the last three themes that *sometimes* deliberately cross over the boundary separating art from anti-art.

One of the earliest and most single-minded attempts to produce something wholly meaningless is to be found in that small but rigorous body of work produced by Duchamp. In 1916, he produced *Rendezvous of Sunday*, which consists of four typewritten postcards and whose seemingly grammatical sentences do not express propositions. As Duchamp described the project:

> There would be a verb, a subject, a complement, adverbs and everything perfectly correct as such, but meaning in these sentences was a thing I had to avoid. . . . the construction was very painful in a way, because the minute I did think of a verb to add to the subject I would very often see a meaning and immediately I saw a meaning I would cross out the verb and change it until, working for a number of hours, the text finally read without any echo of the physical world . . . that was the main point of it. (Schwarz, 1969, p. 457)

This kind of deliberate non-sense is to be contrasted with the witty, entertaining nonsense written by a Lewis Carroll or an Edward Lear. It is intended to defeat our habitual response to find meaning in the written word, aesthetic significance in the literary offering. It is not an audacious attempt to explore the furthermost boundaries of literary art; it lies, by design, beyond them and occupies a different logical space, that of anti-art.

In parallel with what Duchamp was doing, Cabaret Voltaire opened its doors in 1916 and launched an attack on art and its bewildered patrons though in a far more raucous manner. On one occasion, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco and Hugo Ball simultaneously declaimed at the top of their voices three different poems, which were chosen for their banality, in three different languages. Plainly, the intention was to shock, to disreward aesthetic contemplation, and this may have provoked the audience to question their own safe, bourgeois assumptions about

art at a time when the civilization it was held to exemplify was mired in self-destruction.

The theme of the readymade or found object is particularly important, for not only has it influenced the practice of later generations of artists, such as the Nouveaux Réalistes, Fluxus and the Conceptual Art movement, the readymade has been appropriated as a theoretical paradigm in much contemporary art-school theory. In the light of this, it cannot be emphasized too strongly that the readymade represents one of Duchamp's most confusing and confused responses to the question noted above: 'Can one make works which are not works of art?' In attempting to answer this question, Duchamp produced work in the period 1913 to 1923, including the readymades, that ranged across art, anti-art and 'anart', the latter term being a neologism of his own coining.

Though Duchamp emphasized the negative or merely indifferent aspects of the readymades, he made other remarks, quite inconsistently, that suggest they should, in fact, be treated as art. The truth of the matter is that some readymades can be claimed for art, while others should be counted, as originally intended, as anti-art, with a few falling into the category of 'anart', by which Duchamp meant non-art – a kind of limbo.

Comb (1916), a small iron comb inscribed with a nonsensical sentence, should be counted as a piece of anti-art. The sentence reads in translation as 'Three or four drops of height have nothing to do with savagery'. Some fifty years later, Duchamp boasted of the readymade's aesthetically nondescript nature, which suggests he was searching for a visual counterpart to *Rendezvous of Sunday*, i.e. something that would be meaningless or pointless from a visual point of view and so lie outside and beyond the aesthetic. It is doubtful, however, whether there are such visual counterparts to be had, since almost anything with an appearance can be scrutinized from an aesthetic point of view, even though it may lack visual qualities of much interest. Given that *Comb* was primarily intended to forestall aesthetic contemplation it belongs, even if unsuccessful, to anti-art.

The most infamous of the readymades, *Fountain* (1917), should also be classified as anti-art. Duchamp explained its meaning and genesis thus: '[*Fountain*] sprang from the idea of making an experiment concerned with taste: choose the object which has least chance of being liked. A urinal – very few people think there is anything wonderful about a urinal. The danger to be avoided lies in aesthetic delectation' (Schwarz, 1969, p. 466). *Fountain*, then, is yet another variation on the Duchampian theme of the tyranny of taste in art. What Duchamp is trying to do with certain of the readymades is to attack taste either by producing something that is wholly repugnant to it or by producing something entirely indifferent to it, which does not come within its orbit. *Fountain* takes the first route. It is an experiment in taste designed to shock, disgust and repel the spectator, and for its success depends upon one simple condition. Hans Richter, who was himself a Dadaist, described that condition in retrospect as follows:

> Fifty years ago, the art gallery was regarded as a 'place in which the Gods spoke'. The works exhibited there consecrated by tradition, by history and by accepted criteria of value, constituted a reservoir of human experience and scales of values against which generation after generation could measure itself. (Richter, 1965, p. 209)

Hence a spectator in 1917 would hardly have expected to find a urinal in the place where the Gods were accustomed to speak. If *Fountain* had gone on display instead of being partitioned off and hidden from public view, as it was, then its presence in an art gallery would have been considered a sacrilege. And because art was commonly understood to be something against which 'generation after generation could measure itself', *Fountain* would have been seen, as it was intended to be, as the very antithesis of art and all it stood for. In particular, the urinal's associations would have been found repulsive (part of the experiment), while the mass-produced nature and strictly utilitarian function of the urinal would have been interpreted, rightly, as an attack on the Fine Art tradition. Traditionally, a work of art is expected to exhibit a high degree of artistry and show skill in handling the medium. *Fountain*, however, does neither.

If anything *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) is a more blatant attack on traditional values than *Fountain*. Duchamp has taken one of the most celebrated masterpieces of European art – the *Mona Lisa* – and defaced it. By adding a goatee and moustache, he has turned the enigma into an androgyne and underscored the point with an obscene play on words. When the letters are read phonetically in French they sound like the sentence: 'Elle a chaud au cul' (she has a hot arse). Commenting on his motives, Duchamp said: 'In 1919, when Dada was in full blast, and we were demolishing many things, the *Mona Lisa* became a prime victim. I put a moustache and a goatee on her face simply with the idea of desecrating it' (Schwarz, 1969, p. 477). The readymade, then, rejects the values supremely associated with the *Mona Lisa* and by turning it into an obscene image is primarily intended to disreward aesthetic contemplation. It gives expression to a profound nihilism.

The readymades influenced later generations of artists, including Joseph Kosuth and the Conceptualists, many of whom wished to abolish the object partly, among other things, in order to resist the commodification of art and partly to purge art of aesthetics and demonstrate how it could enjoy an independent existence. The Conceptual Art movement, then, appropriates anti-art for its own strategic purposes.

There are many examples of Conceptual Art that would render the aesthetic null and void, including Robert Morris's *Statement of Esthetic Withdrawal* (1963), Walter de Maria's *High Energy Bar* (1966), Bruce Naumann's *Burning Small Fires* (1969) and Gene Beery's *Word Paintings* (1960–3). Walter de Maria's piece, for instance, consists of a stainless steel bar plus a certificate, which states that the bar qualifies as art only when the certificate is present. Hence it is not the object's

properties, including any aesthetic ones, that constitute its arthood. Naumann's work shows a little more theatrical flair. Naumann has taken a conceptual piece by Ed Ruscha – a book of photographs depicting small fires – and made a small fire out it. Naturally, he photographed the conflagration, which then became his piece. The series of paintings by Gene Berry, includes one with the statement: 'Sorry this painting temporarily out of style. Closed for updating. Watch for aesthetic reopening.' If these pieces make their hostility (for it hardly seems to be indifference) to the aesthetic plain, then an untitled work produced by Christine Kozlov in 1967 goes a stage further. It consists of a reel of clear 16mm film. There is no attempt to fashion something in the medium or manipulate it in any way whatsoever for fear of straying, inadvertently, onto aesthetic territory. Given that the piece is primarily intended to forestall aesthetic contemplation, it must, too, be counted as a piece of anti-art.

The Conceptualist finds herself in a bind, because there is, on the one hand, a desire to frustrate the art world's expectations by not providing it with an art object, while, on the other hand, there is a need to alert the art world to what it has been denied. Without the art world's implicit collusion, however, the act itself would be meaningless. Some Conceptualists found this dependence on the institution of art intolerable.

Robert Barry, for instance, tried to get out of the bind by attempting to deny the art world's right to bestow art status upon his pieces. One piece for the Art and Project show held in Amsterdam in 1969 stated: 'During the exhibition the gallery will be closed.' An even more radical line was taken by two other pieces from the same period. One piece was specified as: 'All the things I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking – 1:36 P.M.; 15 June 1969, New York.' The other piece's specification ran: 'Everything in the conscious perceived by the senses but not noted by the conscious mind during trips to Baltimore, during the Summer of 1967.' This ploy does not work of course, since for Barry's gestures to have any possible point they must be enacted and interpreted in the context of the art world.

An Institutional Perspective

The institutional theory of art puts the notion of an art world at the very heart of its account of art and, by extension, anti-art. It provides a new perspective on the latter by focusing on *non*aesthetic factors, and reaches quite different conclusions about the nature and significance of anti-art.

Although the institutional theory has undergone a process of revision and refinement over the years, its main exponent, George Dickie, has never wavered in his belief that what makes something a work of art is the status the artefact has acquired within the social or institutional contexts of art production; e.g. art schools, art museums and galleries, journalistic and critical practices and so on and so forth. It is not, and never was, the fact that a work possesses this or that

characteristic, for instance, expressiveness or being a representation. Nor is something art because it fulfils a certain function, for instance, an aesthetic function. A work of art owes its existence wholly to the art world and the social practices it alone can legitimate.

It is this early version of the theory that Dickie applies to anti-art and analyses without using the terms 'aesthetic' and 'taste'. He distinguishes four main themes at play in the idea of anti-art, which overlap with those discussed above, and thinks that the only ones raising deep-seated problems are the readymades and actions performed in the context of art but which do not result in the production of objects.

Dickie believes that the readymades should be described as anti-art and approvingly quotes the critic Harold Rosenberg's remark that it would be senseless to contemplate such a thing as Duchamp's *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, the snow shovel of 1915, and even more ill-advised for an art galley to exhibit it. It might seem that Dickie is, implicitly, appealing to traditional criteria here, since the critic, whose views he endorses, surely means that it would be pointless to contemplate readymades under traditional or academic descriptions of artistic or aesthetic objects. That is to say, the snow shovel is not something capable of sustaining, let alone rewarding, a prolonged, loving scrutiny of its three-dimensional form, its curving and flowing lines, its smooth, shiny surface and other visual features. (A complication here is that the original snow shovel, which Duchamp once described as 'beautiful', was lost, and its 'replicas' are not ideally accurate.) Be that as it may, the question Dickie goes on to ask illustrates the very different approach adopted by the institutional theory: 'How can a "readymade", which certainly seems entitled to the label "anti-art" because it is senseless to contemplate it, nevertheless, be a work of art?' (Dickie, 1975, p. 420).

From an aesthetic perspective such a question would be barely coherent; it, certainly, would not be the right question to ask. For the institutionalist, however, something can, quite intentionally, be aesthetically worthless and still be a work of art. Dickie explains how this is possible:

> When Duchamp declared that his 'readymades' were works of art and entered them in art shows he committed a public and quasi-official act which enmeshed him in an institutional framework, independently of and in spite of his satirical motive. Whatever his intention or intentions, Duchamp succeeded in conferring the status of art on his 'readymades' – he was perhaps an artist in spite of himself. (Dickie, 1975, p. 421)

The readymades, then, are both art and anti-art: art because they have acquired the right kind of status within the artworld; anti-art because it would be senseless to contemplate them. So the readymades, whatever their original status and intentions, are inscribed as works of art by both art history (with all kinds of delay) and the institutional theory.

Perhaps it was Duchamp's fate that prompted Robert Barry to adopt such extreme countermeasures. There wouldn't be an object at all for the art world to

appropriate or, subsequently, for art history to embalm and label. It is this category, where the art object has been wholly eliminated, that raises the greatest difficulties and is the most perplexing for the institutional theory, at least in its early version.

Dickie describes actions of the sort performed by Barry as merely exercising the machinery of the artworld. They are said to be 'real' anti-art on the grounds that they make use of the framework without, however, doing anything with it. Dickie likens the anti-artist to an 'artistic bureaucrat', who, though he or she has a place in the institution, is not genuinely productive. This insight leads Dickie to speculate that if all artists were to produce anti-art only, i.e. were anti-artists without exception, then art would come to an end.

What is not clear from Dickie's account is how we can have two genuine forms of anti-art, one of which (readymades) counts as art and one of which (dematerialized objects) seemingly does not. The distinction appears to be quite arbitrary.

A Post-Kantian Perspective

Unlike Dickie, who attempts to eliminate references to the aesthetic altogether, Thierry de Duve argues that aesthetic judgements are necessarily involved in the naming of something as art or anti-art. This might suggest that an aesthetic perspective of the kind outlined above illuminates his writings. While it is true that de Duve thinks we are obliged to make aesthetic judgements about anti-art, he believes that the nature of such a judgement has been fundamentally changed by the appearance of Duchamp's *Fountain*, which he regards as one of the most decisive moments in the history of modern art. His reconstruction of Kantian aesthetics in the light of Duchampian practice gives his writings a very different flavour from the more traditional writings associated with the aesthetic perspective above.

Thierry de Duve characterizes anti-art as being, above all else, antitaste and stresses how it typically provokes disgust or ridicule, the two feelings that Kant thought were utterly incompatible with taste and could never be part of the aesthetic experience. It is in these broad terms that de Duve analyses the readymades and especially *Fountain*. With close reference to Duchamp's own remarks, de Duve makes a good case for describing *Fountain* as a piece of anti-art on the grounds that it is antitaste and, therefore, in the Kantian scheme of things falls outside the ambit of art. But de Duve gives equal weight to those contradictory remarks of Duchamp's that seem to claim the status of art for this and other readymades. Of one readymade, for example, Duchamp remarked that he had plucked it out of the everyday world and elevated it to an aesthetic plane. In connection with *Fountain* itself, he famously remarked that he had given the urinal a new, original meaning and had, thereby, appropriated it as a work of art. Thus for de Duve, as for Dickie, the readymade is both anti-art *and* art.

Although *Fountain* is a paradigm of antitaste there is a sense in which it can, none the less, figure as the subject of an aesthetic judgement, or so de Duve argues. His argument, however, is dense, convoluted, and at not all easy to summarize.

Roughly, his view seems to be that when we describe something as a work of art what we are, in fact, doing is to *name* something as art rather than classify it by appealing explicitly or implicitly to this or that set of criteria. Thus when we utter the sentence 'This painting is a work of art' we are designating the object picked out by 'this' in the sentence as a work of art. There are no essential or defining features that works of art have and to which we can appeal when we utter such a sentence. There are no 'universals' that enable us to recognize and group together paintings meriting the name 'work of art'. There are simply particular, individual paintings that we judge (on the basis of our feelings) to be art and name as such. Duchamp is credited with making this act of naming overt and explicit with the readymades. Even a urinal, as opposed to a painting, can be the subject of the sentence 'This is a work of art'.

What anti-art makes clear, according to de Duve, is that the traditional, Kantian judgement 'This is beautiful' has been replaced with the modern judgement, first rehearsed by Duchamp, 'This is art'. And, moreover, we no longer have to judge something to be beautiful in order to judge it to be art (though this was never a sufficient condition). In this sense anti-art or antitaste movements have made a huge impact on twentieth-century art and our critical attitudes. Even though the modern judgement 'This is art', does not necessarily involve taste, it remains, for de Duve, an aesthetic judgement, since it is reflexive and, above all, is made on the basis of how one feels about the quality of the object in question.

This rereading of Kant in the light of Duchamp's work is clearly an interesting one. It raises very many difficulties, however. For instance, although anti-art is, rightly, said to be antitaste, it has to be added that anti-art is fundamentally inimical to art in *all* its aspects and not merely taste and disinterested contemplation in the Kantian sense. It is a moot point, then, whether de Duve gives sufficient weight to the unmitigated nihilism of anti-art in its most extreme forms or really comes to terms with its brutal and uncompromising rejection of all values commonly associated with art, including avant-garde art. Furthermore, the crucial distinction between (Kantian) taste judgements and (post-Duchampian) aesthetic judgements is not at all clear, and we need an explanation of what it means to say, if anything, that we can make aesthetic judgements *without* exercising taste in some sense or other.

To summarize: both de Duve and Dickie treat anti-art as a new species of the genus art. According to the aesthetic perspective, however, art and anti-art are not to be confused, for not only would such confusion, in the long run, undermine our concept of art, it would also deny anti-art its very *raison d'être*. To use an analogy drawn from physics, anti-art stands in the same relation to art as antimatter stands in relation to matter. They are polar forces incapable of being reconciled.

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Chapter 20

Marcel Duchamp's Readymades and Anti-Aesthetic Reflex

David Hopkins

Marcel Duchamp's 'readymades' are invoked so often as icons of quasi-philosophical speculation on the nature of art that we have lost sight of the specific theoretical contexts in which the objects were located. This chapter is pledged to re-historicizing certain of the readymades, and *Fountain* in particular, under the methodological assumption that it is only via a careful reconstruction of their historical circumstances that the implications of the readymades for aesthetics can be grasped.

Let us begin, then, with a short historical overview. The readymades are a diverse set of objects ranging from the *Bottlerack* of 1914 to the urinal titled *Fountain* of 1917 (see plate 20.1). They were acquired by Duchamp from commercial suppliers or plucked from everyday circulation and given art status via minor adjustments such as titles. *Fountain* alone seems to have been produced with the intention of testing the institutional parameters of art when it was entered for the New York 'Independents' exhibition of 1917 as a work of art by R. Mutt, to be rejected as such by a Board of Selectors from which Duchamp promptly resigned.

Generally speaking Duchamp's readymades are thought to epitomize an aspect of the Dada impulse prevalent around 1916–23 although Duchamp, who was in New York much of that time, was only peripherally aligned with the European anti-art tendencies that utilized the label. The objects, often generically assimilated, in misleading fashion, to the example of *Fountain*, have generated an enormous literature of theoretical elaboration. I want to begin by reviewing this literature in the light of recent interventions within it.

Recent Philosophical Developments: A Kantian Duchamp

Approaches to the readymades range from the mode of analytical philosophical speculation adopted by the British philosopher Richard Wollheim, which sees them opening up questions about the minimal 'work' content lodged in certain



Plate 20.1 Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917. Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz. © Succession Marcel Duchamp/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2002

examples of avant-garde artistic activity in the twentieth century (Wollheim, 1968) to the cultural theory of commentators such as Peter Bürger who saw the objects as sociological in orientation, representing paradigmatic instances of the modernist avant-garde's urge to erase distinctions between the spheres of art and social existence (Bürger, 1984).

It could be safely asserted that no one strand of theory has yet managed to grasp the multivalence of the readymades. Nevertheless several all-embracing theories have been posited. In terms of analytic philosophy, for instance, two celebrated accounts were developed by Arthur C. Danto and George Dickie. Both philosophers followed leads established by Duchamp in attending to the conceptual auras of the readymades rather than any aesthetic properties intrinsic to them and both symptomatically took *Fountain* as the stepping-off point for their theories. In 1964 Danto famously asserted: 'To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld' (Danto, 1964, p. 580). Dickie was to take the concept of the 'artworld' to develop his well-known 'institutional theory of art' whereby a work of art is constituted as such in social discourse. The two philosophers differed in terms of the weighting they accorded Duchamp but, generally speaking, their theories had the effect of locating the readymades in the domain of art

(by virtue of the dialogue the objects set up with normative definitions of that category) whilst losing track of a sense of the objects as resistant to aesthetics and linked, historically, to Dada (although it was precisely because the readymades resisted conventional aesthetic categories that they were seized on by these philosophers).

The interpretative elasticity deriving from the readymades partly stems from Duchamp himself who produced conflicting accounts of his concerns. In 1953, for instance, he appeared to endorse a pro-art view of the objects, saying that he 'took it [the readymade] out of the earth and onto the planet of aesthetics'.[1] However, in an earlier much-cited note (published as part of the 'A l'infinitif' selection of 1967) he had reflected on whether it was possible to make works of art which were not works of 'art'. 'Artness' was here conceived of as a form of 'material' which Duchamp wished to avoid using. However, if an anti-art position appeared to be implied, Duchamp further rejected this in 1959: 'I am against the word "anti" because it's a bit like an atheist, as opposed to a believer. And an atheist is just as much a religious man as the believer is, and an anti-artist is just as much of an artist as the other artist. Anartist would have been better. . . . Anartist, meaning no artist at all.'[2] The fact remains, of course, that Duchamp's readymades are now sequestered in histories of art. It would seem that whatever his desire to position himself indeterminately midst the traffic of the 'pro' and 'anti' dialectic, history has decreed that he ended up affirming art, if only by force of negation.

In the most comprehensive recent study of Duchamp's aesthetics Thierry de Duve asserts in fact that Duchamp's readymades are exemplary of the condition of 'artness' in an absolute sense. In Duve's view, Duchamp's *Fountain*, the readymade he chooses to concentrate on, embodies the Modernist notion of art since rather than attempting to engage with the disciplinary constraints of a medium (painting or sculpture for example) it emblematizes the quintessential moment of nomination. In de Duve's terms the object stands for the possibility of 'art at large'. When Duchamp says 'this is art' he asserts the art principle outside any limiting requirements of taste or morphology.

This nominalist viewpoint had its origins in Duchamp's own statements. As part of the 'defence' of *Fountain* published in the proto-Dada magazine *The Blind Man* in May 1917 Duchamp's justification of the object partly turned on the fact that R. Mutt (the artist to whom the object was attributed) had not so much made the object as *chosen* it, creating in the process 'a new thought for that object'. Ignoring the metaphorical play which is implied here, certain artists and theorists of the 1960s harnessed the notion of nomination to formulate theorizations of a post-Duchampian 'Conceptual Art'. According to the American Conceptualist Joseph Kosuth Duchamp's readymades 'changed the nature of art from a question of morphology to a question of function. This change – one from "appearance" to "conception" – was the beginning of "modern" art and the beginning of "conceptual" art' (Kosuth, 1991, p. 18). Kosuth was engaged in a debate with the essentialist Modernist aesthetics of Clement Greenberg.

However, he might be accused of simply replacing formalist tautologies with conceptual ones. The simplified version of his formulations, the credo (originally attributed by Kosuth to Donald Judd) 'if someone calls it art, its art' would eventually endorse a slackening of criteria for evaluation which, at its worst, led to a kind of 'anything goes' ethos.

Conscious of the dangers outlined above, de Duve's recent study (1996) attempts to reclaim the 'nominalist' or 'enunciative' position in relation to the readymades by invoking precisely the Kantian aesthetics Kosuth was opposed to. Basically, de Duve argues that, via a historical process initiated when the public for the Salon des Refusés of 1863 were understood not to be arbiters of taste but of whether or not the objects they were viewing deserved to be called art, the central guarantor of aesthetic value in the Kantian schema, the phrase 'this is beautiful', has come to assume its specifically modern form in the readymade with the pronouncement 'this is art' (Duve, 1996, chapter 5). However, de Duve argues that an essential feature of Kant's account of aesthetic judgement still holds: the imperative that judgement has its basis in the subjective experience of disinterested pleasure (which compels the enunciator to feel his or her judgements command universal assent) rather than concepts (i.e. the identification of particular objects as, for example, 'chairs' or 'tables', although de Duve has some difficulties with the possibility that 'art' itself is a concept of sorts). On this view the judgement 'this is art' does not derive its legitimation from the artworld's institutionalization of maverick conceptual innovation, but from subjective conviction. For de Duve this aesthetic value has its grounding in what Kant called a 'sensus communis' or 'common sentiment' (although the existence of such a principle was hardly verifiable according to Kant, but something to be presupposed or posited). As objects which collapse the distinction between making art and judging it the readymades stand as symbolic *exemplifications* of a radical democratization. (It should not be assumed, though, as Beuys and other advocates of an art-life continuum assumed, that the readymades appealed to a 'concept' of the social. This would be to weaken the exemplary ethical force of the readymades.)

The ethical tenor of de Duve's position here is again rooted in Duchamp's utterances. Expressing an impatience with being considered unproblematically 'anti-art' Duchamp said on one occasion: 'I would like to be – I don't know what you say – nonexistent, instead of being for or against. . . . The idea of the artist as a sort of superman is comparatively recent. . . . I'm against this attitude of reverence the world has. Art, etymologically speaking, means to "make". Everybody is making, not only artists, and maybe in coming centuries there will be a making without the noticing.'[3] Certainly de Duve's position is interesting in relation to the artistic ambience of the 1990s where forms of moral or ethical duplicity routinely came to constitute the very subject matter of art (consider Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst). However, de Duve's argument is perhaps a little too morally earnest to register Duchamp's wit, whilst the intricate details of his exposition, such as the assertion that the term 'art' functions in a similar fashion

to 'proper names', have been shown to be flawed (see Gaiger, 1997). In reviving the terms of traditional aesthetics he ends up downplaying the way in which the readymades encode Duchamp's strategic *irresolution* with regard to pro-aesthetic and anti-aesthetic positions. De Duve is convincing when he registers Duchamp's multivalence in statements such as '*Fountain* was a coup making the avant-garde's dialectical law explicit' (Duve, 1996, p. 28) but his overriding desire to make the readymade embody the historical shift from aesthetics to art-as-nomination arguably has the effect of ossifying this dialectical dynamic.

Perhaps it is not so much Kant's account of aesthetic judgement *per se* as the notion of 'disinterestedness', on which it is predicated, that usefully sheds light on Duchamp's ambivalence to aesthetic fixities. For Kant an essential prerequisite of any act of aesthetic judgement was that it be uninfluenced by personal appetites. In the 'First moment' of the *Critique of Judgement* he asserted: 'The delight which we connect with the representation of the real existence of an object is called interest. Such a delight, therefore, always involves a reference to the faculty of desire. . . . Now, where the question is whether something is beautiful, we do not want to know, whether we, or any one else, are, or even could be, concerned in the real existence of the thing, but rather what estimate we form of it on mere contemplation' (Kant, 1952, pp. 42–3). It might be asserted that Duchamp's readymades epitomize the Kantian requirement of aesthetic disinterestedness. The American theorist Steven Goldsmith, for instance, notes that to wrench objects from their functional environment forces us to look at them in formal terms (Goldsmith, 1983, p. 198).

However, Goldsmith's clearly articulated arguments are occasionally weakened by a tendency which bedevils much of the aesthetic discourse on the readymades: a predilection for the historical generalizations I noted at the start of this essay. At one point he talks of Duchamp shaking the art world by selecting 'commonplace objects, including a urinal provocatively entitled *Fountain* . . . and exhibiting them . . . on pedestals in museums' (ibid., p. 197). In fact, as already indicated, *Fountain* was not shown in a museum but entered for an art exhibition from which it was rejected. William Camfield's exhaustive account of the work establishes that it never officially went on public display and eventually disappeared completely (Camfield, 1989, pp. 27–8). Strictly speaking it only continued to exist as a *photograph*, reproduced in the magazine *The Blind Man*, a point which allows de Duve, along with many commentators mindful of the changes wrought by new technological conditions last century, to note that part of its function as an exemplar of art's condition under modernity was to point towards a post-auratic destiny for art later to be theorized by Walter Benjamin 1970.

This example warns us that is only by attending to the *historical specificities* of individual readymades that the subtleties of Duchamp's position can be appreciated. My main concern from this point on will be to show that, whilst in abstract terms the notion of 'disinterest' might appear integral to the principle of the readymade, in a range of cases it was actively interrogated by

Duchamp in order to explore the *borderline* between aesthetic and nonaesthetic responses.

The Spectator's Interests: Aesthetic Intentions and the Readymades

Although it has been necessary so far to discuss Duchamp's *aims* in producing the readymades, it is now appropriate to focus on how he downplayed his expressive input. In 1957 he made the famous assertion that 'it is the spectator who makes the picture'.[4] He further elaborated this in his important lecture of 1957 on 'The creative act' in terms of the artist's inability to mediate between the 'unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed' (Sanouillet and Peterson, 1973, p. 139). With such statements in mind, the art historian Rosalind Krauss has argued that the readymades are pledged to short-circuiting the assumptions about an artist's expressive 'intentions' that frequently serve to regulate our aesthetic decisions. She argues that, although the way in which *Fountain* was recorded photographically, with a shadow falling along its curves and giving a sensuous 'female' form to the object, obviously rendered the object susceptible to metaphorical interpretations, our knowledge that Duchamp's intervention as a maker was minimal places limits on our ability to claim that specific metaphorical or even formal decisions were 'intended'.

Krauss suggests that no period of time elapses between seeing an object such as *Fountain* and appreciating its meaning; rather the viewer senses that the readymade has 'dropped from nowhere into the stream of aesthetic time' (Krauss, 1981, p. 81). Duchamp voiced a desire to detach his work both from his own aesthetic likes and dislikes, and from determinate interpretations on the part of spectators, on several occasions. Hence in 1961 he made a further maddeningly contradictory statement to the effect: 'The point I very much want to establish is that the choice of these "readymades" was *never* dictated by an aesthetic delectation. This choice was based on a reaction of *visual indifference* with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste . . . in fact a complete anesthesia.'[5] The notion of the 'anaesthetic' correlates with a desire asserted by Duchamp on another occasion to be what he described as an 'anartist' and suggests that indifference was a strategy for pushing the thematics of 'disinterestedness' to a point of absurdity. As Krauss further elaborates, Duchamp effectively sets a kind of structural operation in motion – a 'mechanization of the art act' (Krauss, 1981, p. 76) – by which an open-ended dialogue between object and spectator is set up with the artist's expressive 'intentions' removed from the equation. In the process it could be asserted that the spectator's interests are given *excessive* play. 'Disinterest' is parodically courted at one level but flatly denied at another. In line with Duchamp's credo, the spectator effectively 'completes' the work.

The sense of *excessive interests* being solicited can be illuminated by examining the way it is precisely 'involuntary' areas of human response, often of a bodily nature and thus removed from the traditional domain of aesthetic contempla-

tion, that Duchamp's staging of quasi-mechanistic 'encounters' between spectators and objects seems pledged to setting up. The thematics of bodily or mental reflex have been accorded little importance in the historical and philosophically orientated literature thus far. However, closer attention to this issue in the case of specific readymades can now be shown to pay theoretical dividends.

Duchamp *contra* Kant: Notes on the Reflex

Reflex and bodily spasm were recurrent themes in Duchamp's output. In this respect his ironic relation to the figure of Descartes – he described himself as a 'defrocked Cartesian' on one occasion – partly derives its impetus from the Cartesian discourse about the relationship between voluntary and involuntary actions, which had its underpinnings in mind–body dualism. Descartes had made analogies between the way external objects provoke sensory reflexes and the way in which visitors triggered the movements of automata in the fashionable grottoes in the French royal gardens of the seventeenth century: 'they cannot enter without stepping on certain tiles which are so arranged that if, for example, they approach a Diane who is bathing they will cause her to hide in the reeds' (Descartes, 1985, pp. 100–1). Duchamp's *Large Glass*, the complex glass construction he laboriously produced in New York at the same time as the readymades, parodically envisaged a scenario where a Bride's 'stripping' was triggered by messages received from her Bachelors. It is no coincidence that Duchamp's New York readymades were produced in an intellectual ambience where the reductive physiological mechanics of Cartesianism had come to inform the 'behaviourist' psychology, informed by the principles of 'reflexology', of the Chicago-based John B. Watson. According to this positivistic school of thought, psychological phenomena were held to be accountable solely by virtue of external stimuli rather than via the workings of consciousness. Given that Watson's ideas were topical in cultural circles from 1913 onwards, the pragmatic auras of several of Duchamp's New York readymades seem to represent an amused translation of such ideas into ironically 'aesthetic' terms.

Trébuchet of 1917 consisted of a coat rack nailed to the floor of Duchamp's studio. It envisaged the possibility of the entrant to the studio being tripped up prior to even seeing an object from which he might be able to solicit an 'aesthetic experience' (the word 'trébuchet' means snare, and denotes the strategy in chess of offering a pawn to one's opponent to make them 'stumble'). Similar ideas informed the title of an earlier readymade, *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915). Here a snow shovel was understood to augur a dislocating jolt (in literal terms, the outcome of hitting hard tarmac after shovelling snow in the course of one of New York's harsh winters). In both these objects, a principle of 'delay' operates, as is the case with much of Duchamp's work in the period, such that the object's latent functionality is made to 'return', so to speak, at some point beyond an imputed aesthetic threshold, and to engender a kind of involuntary responsive

spasm. To return to our earlier discussion of Kant, it seems that Duchamp was trying to establish the experimental conditions for denying the possibility of 'disinterested' aesthetic experience.

The above cases do not exactly make use of reflex actions, but the later 'semi-readymade' *Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy?* (1921), consisting of a small birdcage into which are crammed a cuttlebone and a pile of marble cubes, derives much of its humour from the positivistic climate of American behaviourist psychology. The title of the work seems to pre-empt the spectator's need for 'explanation' of the object by inviting a cathartic spasm. However, as Duchamp noted, 'you don't sneeze at will; you sneeze in spite of your will'.[6] Perhaps he was aware that the issue of the voluntary/involuntary status of sneezing had been a bone of contention during an early phase of reflexology's history. Briefly, sneezing had seemed to resist classification as either voluntary or involuntary since it is possible to suppress a sneeze. (Similarly breathing, which might be said to be 'automatic' can be held back for short periods.) However, the Russian physiologist Ivan Sechenov managed to marshal sneezing and other related phenomena firmly into the category of externally induced reflexes. This was achieved by establishing a model of the relationship between processes of physiological blocking or 'inhibition' and the actions of 'releasing stimuli'. In the case of a baby's sneeze, for instance, it might seem absurd that so insignificant an external stimulus as a particle of dust could trigger so violent a bodily response but it could be argued that the energy for the sneeze had been 'stored up' under certain physiological conditions and only required a minimal 'releasing stimulus'. On this argument, Duchamp's *Why Not Sneeze?* functions parodically as a 'releasing' mechanism, possibly bringing 'unconscious' forces into play. There is a sense in which this understanding of reflex allowed him to undermine the more predictable 'conditioned reflexes' of aesthetic response, to borrow the term developed by Pavlov. Duchamp talked disparagingly on several occasions of aesthetic taste constituting a species of 'habit'.

The project of 'unblocking' acquired habits of response informs another semi-readymade that preceded *Why Not Sneeze?* but anticipated its theme, *Fresh Widow* (1920). The pun on 'French window' which suppresses the 'n' in both words, summons up nasal blockage rather than release, as if the enunciator was suffering from a cold. This pun is further installed in the object, where panes of glass in a miniature pair of French windows are blocked out by shiny leather (this in turn serves to connote the notion of a 'fresh widow'). Duchamp's play on language's role as an agent of 'inhibition' or 'release' alerts us in this instance to a possible concern with the *unconscious* determinants behind various forms of 'blockage'. In a sense this would be to oppose psychoanalysis, which was very much in vogue among expatriate European artists in New York at this time, to the completely opposed terms of 'behaviourism' with its abhorrence of introspective methodologies. All in all, though, this may be interpreted as a mock-scientific corollary for the way in which Duchamp was effecting a shift, in terms

of Modernist art practice, from an aesthetics broadly rooted in Kant (albeit transformed in the nineteenth century by the likes of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche) to a form of proto-Surrealism.

It is interesting, finally, to return to the example of *Fountain* of 1917, understood now not so much as the icon of institutional challenge beloved of philosophical aesthetics, but as an object which hybridizes the (opposed) discourses of reflexology and psychoanalysis and thereby triggers psychophysical reflex at the expense of 'disinterested' aesthetic response. It can be argued that *Fountain* represents an elaborate play on the formation of male-gendered sexuality raised in Freud's Leonardo analysis, published in an English translation by A. A. Brill, a psychoanalyst with connections to Alfred Stieglitz's New York circle, in 1916 (see Hopkins, 1998). Hence, in terms of the way it was presented photographically via Stieglitz's photograph in *The Blind Man* of 1917, prominence was given to a hole positioned centrally at the 'base' of the object (this being the point at which the functionally repositioned urinal would be plumbed into a wall). Given that the curvaceous object as a whole had undeniable 'feminine' connotations (as Krauss herself admits), whilst a text published adjacent to the photograph in *The Blind Man* further assimilated its shape to the notion of the 'Buddha of the Bathroom', it could be said to be bi-gendered. This would strongly suggest that the hole scurrilously evoked the central trope of Freudian accounts of gender-identity formation, the issue of the presence/absence of the (privileged) male genital. (Put crudely, masculine gender is constituted in terms of possession of the penis/phallus, female gender in terms of the lack thereof.)

In so far as the urinal ironically addresses male requirements, the hole at its base therefore summons up the spectre of castration. Now, in terms of Freud's account of one avenue of pathological psychological development, the male unconscious reflex to this shocking encounter would involve a denial of 'lack' and the search for a fetish-object as stand-in. Translated into aesthetic terms, *Fountain*'s 'negative' potential (its ability to repudiate aesthetics) would therefore be 'made good' via a fetishizing process of substitution (*Fountain* as fetishized art object). On this argument, *Fountain* constantly flips dialectically between delivering a reflexive (nonaesthetic) shock and compensating (aesthetically) for this shock. Duchamp's project (in so far as his contradictory statements allow us to posit one) becomes precisely one of *vacillating* between 'aesthetic' and 'non' (or anti-)aesthetic positions. The 'nonaesthetic', it should be emphasized, would be that *excess of interest* which so clearly contravenes the central tenets of Kant's stated requirement for an act of aesthetic judgement. In the final analysis, Duchamp is concerned to establish that our aesthetic interests are inseparable from our individual psychologies and gender positions. This may sound deterministic, but, in terms of surrealist aesthetics and the hybridized strategies of much post-1945 art practice, for which Duchamp's readymades were catalysts, it meant that aesthetics would be submitted to a politics of desire.

Notes

1 Duchamp, unpublished letter to Harriet and Sidney Janis, 1953.
2 Duchamp, interview with George Heard Hamilton and Richard Hamilton: 'Marcel Duchamp speaks', BBC Third Programme broadcast, 1959.
3 Duchamp, interview with Francis Roberts (1962), 'I propose to strain the laws of physics', *Art News*, 67(8), December 1962.
4 Duchamp, quoted by Jean Schuster (1957) 'Marcel Duchamp vite', *Le Surréalisme Même*, 2, Spring, 143.
5 Duchamp, statement from Symposium accompanying the 'Art of Assemblage' exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1961. (Reprinted in MOMA (1992), *Studies in Modern Art 2: Essays on Assemblage*, pp. 135–6).
6 Duchamp, interview with Jean-Marie Drot, in the film 'Jeu d'échecs avec Marcel Duchamp', Paris: Radio Télévision Française, ORTF, 1963.

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PART THREE

Critical Theory and Postmodernism

Chapter 21

Marxism and Critical Art History

David Craven

The collapse of communism has not led to the eclipse of Marxism. In fact, a new lease on life for Western capital in the early 1990s spawned an unanticipated reinvigoration of socialism in the late 1990s. This development occurred even as there had been a dissolution in 1989 of the communist system in the former Soviet Bloc, which always invoked the hyphenated term of "Marxism-Leninism" to sanction its peculiar version of state socialism.

These developments should give us pause, as we reconsider the convoluted nature of Marx's legacy at present. After all, the lineage of Marx has long been more varied and challenging than most detractors and many defenders would have us believe. Indeed, Marx himself once declared: "As for me, I'm not a Marxist," while on another occasion, Marx explicitly repudiated any "personality cult" that would allow the critical project of a major thinker to be enshrined by zealous disciples (Letter to W. Blos, 10 November 1877, in Marx and Engels, 1975, 45, p. 288).

Since Marx was "nothing if not critical" (to quote Shakespeare, his favorite English author), he was far too profound not to disagree with himself periodically on key issues concerning his own theoretical framework. His "second thoughts" ranged instructively from the nature of ideology, the role of the state, and the character of artistic production through both the definition of class and the degree of predetermination exercised by society's economic base on all other social spheres. Consequently, Marx often tested his main explanatory concepts through a restless historical analysis that was relentlessly grounded in empirical research (but it was not *empiricist* in nature, to recall a crucial distinction about materialist history once made by E. P. Thompson).[1]

In a now "classic" analysis that is resolutely sympathetic yet unblinkingly critical of Marx and Marxism, Perry Anderson has rightly noted that the "greatness of Marx's overall achievement needs no reiteration here. . . . [But] the most important responsibility for contemporary socialists may be to isolate the main theoretical weaknesses of classical Marxism, to explain the reasons for these, and to remedy them. The presence of errors is one of the marks of any science: the

pretense of their absence has merely discredited the claim of historical materialism to be one" (Anderson, 1976a, p. 113).

The net result of Marx's newly acknowledged openness and self-critical disallowance of methodological closure is that his thought has become even more important at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This is particularly the case in relation to any subsequent "Marxist" thinker who would have us believe that Marxism, or rather the thought of Marx, culminates in a closed "scientific" system, such as that of so-called "dialectical materialism." Marx is still an unavoidable and world-famous figure in the post-1989 era but, "there is no simple and generally accepted theory or body of knowledge that can be confidently labeled Marxism, even within a single discipline," as Raymond Williams once observed (Williams, 1983, p. 14).

In order to reactivate a much-needed sense of "critical Marxism," we must return to the primary sources on which every tendency within Marxism claims to be predicated. As a sort of *chef d'oeuvre incomplet*, the writings of Marx and Engels comprise a dense cluster of collateral, yet often competing, positions. These positions, with their subtle shifts and turns, do not add up to a single system of seamless views, so much as a broad-ranging set of profoundly suggestive points of departure. Yet, for the sake of maintaining a degree of critical rigor that is always intrinsic to any Marxist analysis worth the name, our task is to explain the method of Marx more stringently, not simply to interpret it anew.

There are of course certain views that are wrongly attributed to Marx and these mistaken attributions should be identified as such, quite aside from whether or not they originated on the right or left of the political spectrum. Just as Marx generally looked at the present in reverse by analyzing all of the things it had *not* become, so we should start by outlining many of the ideas that Marx *never* embraced. Thus, by starting at the end, we can conclude at the beginning, since "Marx did not say the last word – far from it – but he did say the first word, and we are obliged to continue the discourse he inaugurated" (Hobsbawm, 1997, p. 168).

Common Misconceptions about Marx's Ideas

As David McLellan has pointed out, "It simply is not true . . . that Marx ever described the historical process as a movement of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis" (McLellan, 1975, p. xi). Instead of any such ahistorical formula, what Marx did advocate was a summary method, or a flexible methodological framework, for concretely analyzing historical events, even as this method itself should be subject to repeated testing and qualification along the way.

In *The German Ideology* (1846), which contained his first discussion of what he always termed the "materialist conception of history," Marx accented the open-endedness of his own unremittingly rigorous approach (Marx and Engels, 1975, 5, p. 31). Designed to mount a critique of what was regressive and

inequitable about human history, this critical account was also meant to affirm soberly "what is really worth preserving in historically inherited culture." Sensitivity and self-reflexivity would be crucial traits for any stringent analysis that eschewed easy formulas and doctrinaire suppositions. As Friedrich Engels admitted in a letter of 5 June 1890: "the *materialist method* is converted into its opposite if, instead of being used as a guiding thread in historical research, it is made to serve a *ready-cut pattern* on which to tailor historical facts" (Marx and Engels, 1953, p. 493, my italics).

Nor did Engels deny that he and Marx had sometimes lapsed into using just such a "ready-cut pattern" in which the economic infrastructure was assumed to predetermine all other spheres of society – whether in the last instance or the first moment. The consequence in such cases was a determinist straitjacket within which art and culture, as well as political institutions and legal systems, purportedly reflected the economic base upon which everything else in society mechanically hinged. Yet, Engels engaged in some salutary acts of self-criticism when discussing the materialist method. He did so since "all action is mediated by thought" and often has a "codetermining influence" along with economic forces on social development. One instance of this self-critique is found in a letter with constructive advice to Franz Mehring (14 July 1893). Another is in a letter of 21 September 1890 to Joseph Bloch. In the latter Engels admitted that he and Marx were "partly to blame for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic than is due . . . And I cannot exempt many recent 'Marxists' from this reproach' (Marx and Engels, 1953, p. 500).

Even as such concessions attest to the explanatory power of their position when it is tempered by the requisite flexibility, these exemplary exercises in self-reflexivity alert us to evident pitfalls in the studies of Marx and his followers. The first thing to emphasize here is that there are several revealing reasons that Marx, who was a post-Hegelian (but not an anti-Hegelian), never used the system-building neo-Hegelian term "dialectical materialism" when he referred to his own modest and more "negative" method. In fact, the conceptual framework of "dialectical materialism" was only invented several years after Marx's death. Its inventor was the Russian theorist Georgi Plekhanov (1856–1918), the foremost Marxist of that country prior to his student V. I. Lenin. The theory of dialectical materialism was forged by Plekhanov, who wished to systematize Marx's approach into a closed, easy-to-apply system with the irresistible historical force of a teleological trajectory.

V. I. Lenin consolidated this rather reductive line of thinking, as did the other Bolshevik leaders (before it then became a *reductio ad absurdum* in the hands of Stalin). The need for a more reassuringly militant form of "Marxism" during a period of urgent political insurgency led to a rapid deployment of this intellectual tradition on behalf of topical polemics aimed at immediate popular mobilization and unification – whatever the political cost to more exacting and long-term historical scholarship in a calmer setting. Thus, the measured balance that Marx generally maintained between political engagement and critical

detachment was collapsed into the former for obvious reasons of political expediency during a time of acute crisis that nevertheless resulted in the stunning political success of the October Revolution in 1917.

In retrospect, the irony could not be more telling. The high price of these "ten days that shook the world" and the next eight decades of Soviet rule that ensued was twofold. It resulted in an unprecedented measure of global fame, as well as notoriety, for Marx's thought, yet also in a depressing congealment of this same body of thought into something like an agitprop, neo-Thomistic Scholasticism within the powerful Soviet Bloc countries. After all, Marx's materialist approach to history was an example of an *esprit systématique* (a systematic flexible method capable of generating *a posteriori* and often unexpected conclusions), while that of so-called "dialectical materialism" was a particularly cramped instance of *esprit de système* (that is, thinking constrained by an *a priori* system, in which "politically correct" conclusions are merely known in advance of a careful look at unwieldy empirical data).

There is a second reason as well that Marx never deserted the less certain terrain of historical materialism for the more reassuring turf of "dialectical materialism" – namely, Marx's mastery of Classical Greek philosophy and his grasp of various conceptions of dialectics. He wrote his Ph.D. dissertation for the University of Jena on Democritus and Epicurus and was well versed in how the ancient pre-Socratic philosophers like Zeno first used the term "dialectic." For them it was simply a discursive mode of thought that allowed you to grasp logically the way in which nature (like culture) was a matter of continuity as well as discontinuity, both a thing and a process at once.

Moreover, as its origin implies, "dialectic" was a term with a clear link to "dialogue" – or, the interchange of views, often dissimilar. And here we should note that two of the outstanding theoretical moves in the twentieth century centered on a compelling defense of "dialogical" thinking from an unorthodox position *within* classical Marxism. The first involved Mikhail Bakhtin's dissident writings from the 1920s through the 1950s on the dialogical dynamic of culture; the second involved Paulo Freire's revolutionary theory of dialogical pedagogy from the 1960s through the 1980s.[2] One emerged from within the Russian Revolution and the other played a signal role in the innovative cultural policies of the Nicaraguan Revolution (Craven, 1988).

In arriving at his post-Hegelian usage of dialectical discourse, Marx reached back to various pre-Hegelian conceptions of it, even as he also gave the term "dialectic" a much more negative, far less all-encomposing inflection. This advance by Marx was largely lost on most of the orthodox Marxists in the Comintern, only to be regained during the 1920s in the thought of Antonio Gramsci, the early Georg Lukács, and José Carlos Mariátegui, in addition to that of Karl Korsch and Walter Benjamin. For the Comintern, dialectical movement was elevated to being an absolute "law of nature," along with being a supposed "law of history," both of which remained independent of all human agency. Conversely, for Marx the dialectic was neither prior to human thought nor inherent to all

natural process. In no way necessarily mandated by nature, dialectical thinking was simply the most profound and probing way to orchestrate knowledge in order to make maximum sense of history – and thus one of placing humanity in a strong position to change it.

Few have better encapsulated this latter conception of dialectics, than did Fredric Jameson when he wrote of how for Adorno and Marx, "dialectical thinking is thought to the second power, a thought about thinking itself, in which the mind must deal with its own process just as much as with the material it works on, in which both the particular content involved and the style of thinking suited to it must be held together in the mind at the same time" (Jameson, 1971, p. 45).

In the first volume of *Das Kapital* (1867), Marx advanced a related but even more radical idea about the changing nature of human nature. This position has been hailed as one of the "most important advances in modern social thought" – that of the self-construction of the human subject (Williams, 1977, p. 283). To recall Raymond Williams's argument, this meant that Marx took the Enlightenment's idea of "humanity making its own history" and gave it an axial twist to man "humanity making itself" through the production and transformation of its own means of existence along with the built environment sustaining this entire project. Accordingly, Marx wrote in *Kapital* that "Labor is, first of all, a process between people and nature . . . Through this movement man acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature" (Marx and Engels, 1976, p. 283).

The implications of Marx's position here were no less sweeping for art and its production. Far from being a mirror of reality, as it would later become for "dialectical materialism," art was a hammer for aiding in the construction of reality, according to Marx's original conception of historical materialism. The role of art as a formative force rather than as a mere reflective one was discussed by Marx in his *Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy* (1857–59): "An *objet d'art* creates a public that has artistic taste and is able to enjoy beauty – and the same can be said for any other product. Production accordingly produces not only an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object" (Marx and Engels, 1975, 28, p. 30).

As a corollary to this statement about the materially productive role of artists, and as a compliment to art's reproductive function, Marx addressed the disempowering passivity and inertness of earlier conceptions of materialism that were among their chief defects. In *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), whose concept of materialism he was revising, Marx made some signal points that also stand today as incisive criticisms both of mainstream behaviorism and Althusserian "anti-humanism." Vulgar materialists discuss how "people are products of circumstances," while forgetting, Marx added, "that it is people who change circumstance" (Marx and Engels, 1975, 5, p. 3). This multicausal point about *historical* materialism, plus the previous observation about the formative role of art, led Marx to articulate the concept of "the unequal development of material production and, for example, that of art." Marx's brief remarks about art and

uneven development are in *The Grundisse* (1857–8): "As regards art, it is well known that some of its peaks by no means correspond to the general development of society; nor do they, therefore, to the material substructure, the skeleton as it were of its organization" (Marx and Engels, 1975, 28, p. 46).[3]

No sooner have we recalled this little-utilized passage by Marx about the "relative autonomy of art" than we also remember a divergent and generally overused passage by Marx that would seem to cancel out the relative autonomy of art. In the latter pasage he seems to rule out any autonomy for all so-called "superstructural" phenomena, art obviously included. This discussion of the base/superstructure model, which is a favorite of orthodox Marxists and unreconstructed structuralists, is often misassumed to be a basic "law" of Marxist critique. Yet this passage in Marx's Preface to *Critique of Political Economy* (1859) is the only one in his entire corpus of writings where he ever advanced the base/superstructure model. It goes as follows:

> In the social production of their life, people enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite state of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness . . . At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production. . . . Then begins an epoch of social revolution. (Marx and Engels, 1975, 29, p. 263)

A literal interpretation of this passage leads to a framework that is unrelievedly determinist and uncompromisingly structuralist in almost equal measure. Thus, it is a position rather at odds with the concept of "uneven development" so key to historical materialism. Moreover, this determinist reading of the base/superstructural model has little if any way of explaining "class traitors" like Marx whose views are not simply conditioned by their class location. In short, the orthodox interpretation of the base/superstructure model precludes any role for individual agency, since people are assumed to be at the mercy of structural forces over which they have no control. The supposedly all-important structuring logic of society, instead of "voluntarist" political militancy by revolutionary cadres, is identified here as the motor of social transformation.

At this point in Marx's theory we arrive at a particularly fruitful and perplexing problem, since there seems to be a sort of permanent indeterminacy at the core of his corpus. It is marked, on the one hand, by a view of the structural contradictions in society as *the* motor of historical transformation and, on the other hand, by an activist concept of human agency propelling class struggle as *the* definitive force of revolutionary change. At times, this site of tension seems

almost to threaten the entire method of Marx with a jarring tendency to disjunctive conclusions. Yet, far from being an insurmountable impasse, this paradox – or, better, locus of indeterminacy – at the center of Marx's conception of historical development plays a crucial role. It calls for an urgent sense of self-criticism each time any historical materialist deploys a model like that of the base/superstructure or uneven development. In fact, the efforts by diverse followers of Marx to overcome what seems like a contradiction in his approach have led to the virtually unrivalled richness, as well as contentiousness, of Marxism as one of the major traditions in modern thought.

Before we outline some of those different contributions in the twentieth century, we need to discuss briefly the fractious implications of this methodological indeterminacy for several of Marx's other equally noteworthy concepts, all of which are significant for analyzing artistic production.

Class Configurations

Fundamental to any genuine engagement with the realm of necessity or that of contingency is the delineation of three things: the competing sides in conflict, the regulative role of the state in this conflict, and the ideological bonds that hold or split during such a conflict. Among the most widely known of all Marx's positions is his emphasis on class struggle. Indeed some of the most legendary lines by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) address this issue with considerable pungency and force: "The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle," "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains," or "Workers of the world, unite!"

These lines nevertheless cry out for clarification, even as they summon us to the barricades. The vantage point of Marx and Engels is certainly based upon an incontestable observation about human history, along with an incontrovertible conclusion about the tragic course of this history: (a) most societies in most periods have had hierarchically organized social structures in which a small minority of citizens have exercised disproportionate power over a subjugated majority; and (b) the consequence of this inequitable distribution of economic and political power has generally led to the relentless exploitation of most people throughout history. Yet, the terms used by Marx to address these problems are hardly a self-evident way of presenting the brute facts of history. Marx never provided a comprehensive definition of his conception of class. Rather, he operated with a provisional conception of class to explicate this problem in divergent ways throughout various moments.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, for example, Marx and Engels contended that society was increasingly split up into "two great classes facing each other: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat." This notion of class reappears in 1867 in *Kapital*. Such an application of class presupposed a basic line of demarcation: either ownership or nonownership of private property (as opposed to mere

personal possessions), by which Marx meant controlling interest over the means of production (factories, banks, or corporate agribusinesses). In a polemical tract aimed at galvanizing popular insurrection, this two-class model was serviceable enough. But it foundered on the shores of more nuanced historical analysis. Thus, Marx shifted his usage of class at several notable points throughout his career.

In discussing Great Britain, Marx spoke of "the ruling classes," when referring to finance capital and industrial capital as "two distinct classes," not just as a monolithic entity. In his debates with Bakunin, Marx treated the déclassé and largely nonproductive group of people in society called the *Lumpenproletariat* as a different class than that of the proletariat proper. In his explication of the structure of agrarian society, Marx sometimes treated the peasantry as an outdated but still extant class that was an adversary of the new working class. In later studies of the agrarian question, however, Marx defined much of the peasantry as comprising "rural wage labor," therefore as a "working class" with organic ties to the urban proletariat. In doing so, he pitted the "working classes" against the "ruling classes" and introduced along the way a conception of the "popular classes" that has been important to national liberation movements in the Third World. In his final writings, such as the unfinished third volume of *Kapital*, which was published posthumously, Marx wrote of the "three great classes": wage laborers, capitalists, and landowners (McLellan, 1975, pp. 43–5).

Moreover, Marx left the manuscript unfinished at precisely the point where he was attempting to explain why intellectuals and professionals did not constitute a separate class. Further compounding this problem were the issues of defining class fractions and linking notions of *class consciousness* to a class rank that often existed in no direct relation to it. That the complexity of delineating a class has grown in recent years has been noted by Perry Anderson: "no class structure, comparable to that of an earlier capitalism has yet crystallized [in the last three decades]. . . . These are conditions, still, of a certain vertical indefinition" (Anderson, 1998, p. 62).

State Institutions

Similarly, how would one go from grappling with definitions of class to defining the role of the state in this conflicted state of affairs? Since Marx always paid particular attention to the gap within class-based societies between civil society and the state, he felt that an understanding of the state was essential to any critique of a given society. Here again, Marx was too vigilant about "facts on the ground" to settle for a formula that he could simply plug into any historical situation. The three prevailing definitions of the state found in Marx's writings are as follows: first, there is the idea of it as a mere mode of domination, which he and Engels asserted in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). As such, "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the affairs of the whole

bourgeoisie" (Marx and Engels, 1975, 6, p. 486). An illusory façade hiding society's exploitative structures in the name of "national unity," the state here is a simple instrument of domination by the ruling class(es).

This minimalist definition of the state, which was well within the early anarchist tradition, soon became inadequate for more varied analyses. Accordingly, Marx arrived at two more models for addressing the state. One of these construed the state as the main institution for preserving the existing order of things, rather than as an entity that simply served one class's interests. This bureaucratic model saw the state as largely autonomous from society in a way that made it a constraining and often parasitical formation above the class-divided fray. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), Marx attributed this formation of the state to medieval feudal societies and to the Second Empire in France under Napoleon III (Marx and Engels, 1975, 8, pp. 115ff).

Another theoretical paradigm for the state in Marx's writings is a structuralist one, in which the state is seen as predetermined by the structuring logic of the economy. According to this economistic model, which surfaced in a Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in 1859, the state simply reproduced the operations intrinsic to the mode of production underlying all of society. Such a "superstructural" state is politically reflective of the prior economic logic of the economic base. All three of these models for the state can be justified in part by actual historical research, yet each in its own way is too reductive to stand alone as a comprehensive explanation for the function of the state in all periods of history – particularly the state(s) now being reconfigured in relation to the globalizing logic of transnational capitalism.

Fortunately, there were two masterful instances in the twentieth century when a virtuoso deployment of historical materialism for identifying the sites of power in society yielded a synthetic framework capable of accommodating simultaneously all three models of the state in Marx's writings. In both cases, these concepts have been absorbed by a major Marxist thinker into a concentrated, subtle, and broad-ranging conceptual framework for analyzing modern Western society. The first and most famous instance was crafted in the 1920s and 1930s by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*. Although he was actually interested in distinguishing the *hegemony* implanted by civil society from the *domination* implemented by the state, he ended up demonstrating how these two domains often formed an interlocking network.

In adoption the term "hegemony" from earlier Russian socialists like Plekhanov and Axelrod, Gramsci gave it a profound new inflection. Ever mindful of Machiavelli's analysis of direct state domination by autocratic rulers, Gramsci forged a more diffused concept of hegemony for the exercise of indirect control within civil society. This discussion was motivated by Gramsci's efforts to identify the far greater complexity of modern rule in Western Europe, in order to explain why there was no counterpart to the Russian Revolution in places like Italy (Anderson, 1976b, pp. 5–78). As he showed, the multipoint system of hegemonic power was a far more effective counterweight to revolutionary insurgency

than was bald repression. This was because hegemony depends upon the exercise of power through engineering consent, rather than through the imprint of coercion.

In obtaining consent from the popular classes over whom it holds sway, the ruling order use not only state institutions but also a dense network of civil institutions, both formal and informal in character. These hegemony-fostering formations extend from legal codes, familial structures, and educational agencies through the mass media and neighbor associations that traverse the social space between civil society and the state, rather than just the terrain of one or the other. The role of these agencies is to engender acceptance of the existing hierarchical relations of power along with the severely inequitable access to decision making in the workplace, in addition to the domain of political economy more generally. Furthermore, this process of hegemonic governance is orchestrated by both parastatal and state agencies through an ideological mediation that legitimates the status quo and binds most social relations into something like a cohesive system. Thus hegemony incorporates ideology but is not limited to it (Gramsci, 1957).

Buttressed as they are by secondary class allegiances, the ruling classes enjoy hegemony through a dense stratification of consensual and semi-consensual support. Thus, no frontal assault by the subordinate popular classes on those in power is likely, or even possible most of the time. Instead, the interlocking and multivalent nature of this rule by means of both the state and civil society can be overturned only by a protracted class-based "war of positions" between hegemonic culture and the subaltern cultures of the popular classes. In such a subtle conception of power, the state in tandem with civil society has several different and yet interdependent roles in the public sphere. Given the considerable explanatory power of this analysis, Adrian Rifkin was probably justified in asking in an art journal, "Can Gramsci save art history?" (Rifkin, 1980).

The second great amendment to Marx's treatment of the state and civil society was published forty years after the Italian thinker's death during the Poststructuralist phase of Nicos Poulantzas's late post-Althusserian writings. In his last book in the late 1970s, Poulantzas disputed older and more one-dimensional definitions of the state, such as the one inherent to the Structuralist Marxism of Althusser, his teacher. Far from being either a simple instrument of ruling-class domination or a seemingly "neutral" arbiter above the class struggle or a mere replication of the logic of the mode of production, the state in Poulantzas's view was a combination of all three things that showcased yet other attributes as well. By defining the state in a far more dynamic and "decentered" manner, Poulantzas was able to argue that the state is not to be identified merely with the institutional implementation of power, but must be understood also as a *site of contestation* whereby there is a struggle over power among various classes and class fractions (Poulantzas, 1978).

In replacing these more limited concepts of the state with a new multidimensional concept of the state in relation to power, Poulantzas reformulated

the state as a social phenomenon involving the interaction of competing groups that continually negotiate power. No longer seen simply as the instrumental expression of one set of seamless class-based interests, the state is here understood as a condensation of social conflicts that also pervade other spheres, albeit to varying extents. Thus, the "contradictory" state outlined by Poulantzas is never entirely stabilized nor conclusively centered, however powerful its sway over society. As he noted, openings for structural change in society emerge therefore from these *intra*-class shifts and *inter*-class tensions within the state itself, as well as from civil institutions of the public sphere.

When Poulantzas first advanced this new theory of the state, it precipitated a stirring debate in the late 1970s with Ralph Miliband and others that forced Poulantzas to ground his position with more empirical data and a heightened sense of self-criticism. As a number of recent case studies in art history have demonstrated – including my own publications about revolutionary cultural policy in Mexico, Cuba, and Nicaragua – Poulantzas's framework is particularly effective for explaining the co-existence of competing ideological tendencies within the arts of the very same revolutionary state. The work of Diego Rivera, for example, on commission from the Mexican Government during the 1920s and 1930s, is explicable in part only because the Mexican state of this period was indeed just such a condensation of conflicting forces marked by fissures that in turn allowed openings for several different positions to emerge in period artworks. As Rivera himself knew well, the meaning of his groundbreaking images in the Ministry of Education (1923–8) resided at the unsettled intersection of broadly contested interests both *within* a contradictory, nonmonolithic state and *between* the federal government and the various organizations mobilized to pressure it into taking a more left-wing direction, which was in line with Rivera's "ultra-left" politics (Craven, 1997, pp. 53–100).

Ideology

Yet how could artwork assume an ideological signification that in some respects at least contradicted the wishes of those in the state who commissioned this public art? After all, to quote Marx in *The German Ideology* (1846): "The ruling ideas of the time are the ideas of the ruling class." In order to understand better the asymmetrical relationship between art and the state we are confronted here with the problem of defining ideology per se and also with a key question: why has ideological critique assumed a fundamental place within Marxist art history? How then did Marx define ideology and was he ever able to offer one comprehensive definition of it?

Marx took over the term "ideology" from the French Revolution of 1789. It was actually coined in the 1790s by Antoine Destutt de Tracy and originally meant a "science of ideas" capable of conceiving a set of progressive positions that could guide society in an enlightened direction. (Evidently Napoleon later

invented the term "ideologue" at a particularly conservative bend in his own winding career, when he wanted to attack "dogmatic" revolutionists like Destutt de Tracy.) At first, Marx retained this original usage in some of his early essays, even though he would ultimately define ideology in at least four different ways throughout his career. Later, Lenin would also utilize a variation of this first conception in *What Is To Be Done?* (1905), when he called socialism "the ideology of struggle of the proletarian class" and claimed that in the class struggle "socialism" is necessarily "introduced by the ideologues" (Eagleton, 1991, pp. 85–91).

Revealingly enough, the other three concepts of ideology used by Marx at various moments are not always easy to interrelate with this first and quite straightforward definition of it as a programmatic set of consciously held ideas about society. The second concept of ideology employed by Marx was one that appeared with the very word in its title. In *The German Ideology* (1846), Marx and Engels referred to ideology in a much more negative vein as a set of illusory beliefs that keep people from rationally understanding their real conditions of material existence. This very influential second definition went as follows:

> [I]n all ideology people and their circumstances appear upside down as in a *camera obscura*. . . . In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth; here we ascend from earth to heaven. . . . We set out from real, active people, and on the basis of their real life process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process. (Marx and Engels, 1975, 5, p. 36)

This second definition of ideology was also the one that on 14 July 1893 led Engels, in a letter to Franz Mehring (over a decade after Marx's death) to describe ideology for the first time as "false consciousness" (Marx and Engels, 1953, p. 541). Although Marx never actually used this phrase, it was definitely consistent with his contention that ideology often entails an illusory misunderstanding of how society unfolds. This "negative" understanding of ideology as an illusionary sense of material conditions was subsequently the starting point for Althusser's ingenious structural redefinition of ideology as mere "false *un*consciousness." Or, as Althusser put it, ideology constitutes "the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 1978, p. 162). For all the cogency of this antihistoricist interpretation of ideology by Althusser (who baldly remarked in the same essay that "Ideology has no history"), it presupposes a congruence between ideology and falsehood that is illuminating at certain moments and dead wrong at others.

The third concept of ideology used by Marx entailed a broadening of his understanding of this phenomenon, but this alternative vantage point did not simply invalidate all that was of merit in the two earlier definitions. Instead of being programmatic beliefs about social change or mystified views about social conditions, the third definition was in a certain sense a combination of both. Here ideology was construed to be a legitimate expression of the actual interests of a particular class, part fictive and part factual in nature, in relation to a given

system. Anchored realistically in certain social formations and yet banking on the as-yet-unrealized (hence "unreal") potential of these formations, ideology so defined is not so much right or wrong as it is more or less limited. According to this definition, the superiority of working-class ideology is that it takes into account the interests of all humanity (and is thus a "classless", as well as radically egalitarian, ideology). All other class-based ideologies are only beneficial to one social class or group, to one degree or another. They thus represent less the interests of humanity, than those of an elite or provincial group within it.

This third definition of ideology features a subtle ratio of truth value to outright illusion that revolves around the gap between empirical observation and an abstract worldview – with the latter generally edging out the former for acceptance. Thus, ideology involves both a cognitive and noncognitive grasp of reality that is true on one level and false on another. This third and more complicated concept of ideology in Marx's later work is one that yielded some especially remarkable advances in the 1920s and 1930s, from Gramsci and Mariátegui through Benjamin and Adorno. It was with this group and the origin of "critical theory" that the noteworthy shift was made from seeing ideology just as a system of progressive ideas or negative illusions to grasping it as a set of *lived* social practices marked by varying degrees of self-realization. This conception also triggered the concept of "behavioral" ideology that emerged with Voloshinov in the 1920s and flourished after the 1960s in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, the sociologist, ideology involves habitual acts within society that are based on class-structuring disposition. These ideological habits are bound together by an internalized "cultural unconsciousness" with *actual* relations to both real *and* imagined conditions of existence (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 192).

The fourth and final definition of ideology used by Marx appeared most arrestingly in an extremely complicated passage from his later writings, that is, the first part of volume one of *Kapital* (1867). In this magisterial discussion of the secrets of *commodity fetishism*, Marx deployed 'ideology' to mean a field of duplicitous and disfiguring relationships that are not so much wrong as they are misleading and socially constraining. As a result of this dislocated link to material conditions, "the mind reflects an inversion in reality itself" that results from the tenacious but never absolute hold of commodity fetishism. That is, we both see and misperceive the nature of our relations to the world through the veil of fetishized commodities in a constellated system that revolves around them.

The metaphor of the *camera obscura* that Marx uses without much success in his early writings on ideology, as others have noted (Mitchell, 1986, pp. 168ff), suddenly gained unprecedented trenchancy in this fourth definition of ideology. Here we can paraphrase Terry Eagleton again: in *The German Ideology* Marx defined it as a matter of not seeing things as they really are, and in *Kapital* he discussed ideology more expansively as a form of structurally constrained thought that is less downright false than it is markedly reductive and generally disempowering (thus being tied to one's class interests rather than to those of humanity in a more all-encompassing manner). Ideology here is *both true and*

false, while being contingent upon a deceptive combination of the two that *naturalizes* the historically constructed in such a way as to make it look "inevitable" (Eagleton, 1991, pp. 85–91).

This highly nuanced fourth definition of ideology spawned a series of brilliant engagements with the problem of ideology, starting with two legendary books from 1922–3: *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* (*History and Class Consciousness*) by Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács and *Marxismus und Philosophie* by German thinker Karl Korsch. Each of these studies in turn had a profound impact first on the 1930s – when "critical theory" was originated by the Frankfurt School (Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, T. W. Adorno, and Walter Benjamin) – and then on the 1960s – through Guy Debord's critique of the "society of the spectacle" and Henri Lefebvre's crucial work on the logic of quotidian life in the postwar West.

In his book, the young Lukács virtually invented the concept of reification as we now understand it. Enormously controversial in its own day and still much debated in our own, this landmark critique both inspired the creation of the Frankfurt School in 1923 and was promptly denounced by the Bolshevik leaders of the Comintern in 1924. Whether intentionally or nor, Lukács revalorized subjectivity and critical self-reflexivity in a way that became a stark rebuke to the economism of Soviet-style "dialectical materialism." As Lukács explained reification, it dramatically extended Marx's notion of alienation (or the estrangement from oneself, from others, from one's own work, and from the labor process *per se*). For Lukács this meant that reification entailed the fragmentation and dislocation of modern social experience in a way that causes people to forget that the course of society always presupposes a collective process, an overarching structural logic. The experience of modernity thus encourages people to see things as if they were mere isolated objects, or as if they were utterly autonomous agents. Consequently, the present is *not identical-with-itself* (to recall Adorno's extension of this position) once the potential of the present to be transformed is suppressed by the status quo (Lukács, 1923).

Reification as Lukács defined it does not lead only to "false consciousness" about history, but also to a densely mediated manner of ideologically framed perception that, mired as it is in the immediacy of the moment, is a demobilizing and superficial way of seeing things – as if they really were outside of the larger historical process whereby things have come into being. Recently, British art historian Paul Wood aptly underscored the ongoing significance of Lukács's now "classic" study to art historical analysis at a time when we have gone from "concealed commodification as a principle of modern art" to a stage where "Postmodernism has learned to love the commodity" (Wood, 1996, p. 257).

No one definition of ideology suffices, yet the existence of ideology in various forms is a fact for two incontestable reasons. First, no thought is without presuppositions about how to organize empirical information. Hence, the nonexistence of thought without at least some prior constitutive assumptions means that virtually all thinking about relations of power entails ideological mediation

of some sort, on at least some level. Denial of this situation is simply a declaration of ignorance. Second, every vision of society no matter how conformist or dissident, no matter how exclusionary or inclusive, involves a recourse to regulative ideas to implement or sustain that social vision. In this practical sense, Althusser and others have been right to contend that, as citizens within any social system, people are ideological by their very nature.

Ideological Critique and Art History since 1970

But when did art historians on the left begin using Marx's various definitions of ideology to advance "critical art history" – whether one calls it the social history of art, the New Art History, or Marxist art history. In a fine historiographic essay, Alan Wallach once observed that Marxist-inspired art history "divides into two periods, the first running from the mid-1930s to the early 1940s, the second beginning in the early 1970s and continuing through today" (Wallach, 1984, pp. 15–17). Seventeen years later his schema remains generally valid, as does his thoughtful analysis, except for one recent amendment: we now know a good deal more about the interregnum from the late 1940s through the 1960s, when Meyer Schapiro (1904–96) almost single-handedly practiced an exemplary form of unorthodox Marxism in his analysis of art and society (Craven, 1994).

Schapiro's work served as an extension and refinement of the landmark publications by the three greatest scholars of the first phase of Marxist-based art history – Frederick Antal (1887–1954), Arnold Hauser (1892–1978), and Max Raphael (1889–1952) – along with the related materialist analyses of Francis Klingender (1907–55), Anthony Blunt (1907–83), and Milton Brown (1908–98). It is important to recall that both Antal and Hauser were Hungarian intellectuals who supported the Hungarian Revolution of 1919. Each of them knew Georg Lukács personally since they were members of the celebrated "Sunday Circle" in Budapest (1915–18) and all three of them were forced into exile with the suppression of the 1919 uprising.[4]

Significantly, Schapiro's more multilateral and unorthodox approach was also a notable antecedent for the "critical art history" that arose in the 1970s in alliance with the New Left. Only then were the richness, complexity, and indeterminacy of Marx's method finally freed from the constraints of orthodoxy and the reductiveness of "dialectical materialism." At this point in the disciplinary life of art history within the West, Marxism entered into a hybrid theoretical dialogue with various other strains of left-wing thought – from feminism and the environmental movement through "post-colonial" theory originating in the Third World. Among the founders of this new "critical art history" in the 1970s are to be found many of the most accomplished art historians and practitioners of *Kulturkritik* at present.

In Germany, where New Left art history surfaced earliest and most expansively in 1970, there were the landmark "ideological critiques" of Martin

Warnke, O. K. Werckmeister, Horst Bredekamp, Michael Müller, Franz-Joachim Verspohl, Berthold Hinz, and Jutta Held, among many others (Warnke, 1970). Moreover, the scholarly work of Warnke, Bredekamp, and Werckmeister remains a very vital force in the life of the discipline right up to the present owing to their thought-provoking renovation of critical art history from within. The latter three, plus Wolfgang Kemp, have in the last five years also prompted a probative and much needed reassessment of the founding figures of mainstream art history – from Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin through Erwin Panofsky and Aby Warburg.[5]

In Hungary, there was a related but far smaller movement that featured primarily the articles of Anna Wessely. Beginning in the 1970s, she wrote a series of incisive critiques of Antal, Hauser, and Lukács, along with several essays on the history of scientific method in relation to cultural studies, that continued to appear right up through the 1990s (see note 4).

In the United States, the 1970s saw an unprecedented dialogue within art history between unorthodox Marxism and militant feminism. It all began with a commanding piece in 1971 by Linda Nochlin and was quickly consolidated by such left-wing scholars as Carol Duncan and Eunice Lipton, among many others, in a succession of important articles (Nochlin, 1988, pp. 145–78). Later in the 1970s, the US was a key place wherein there were numerous institutional critiques by Alan Wallach and Carol Duncan of the ideological function of the art museum both in the USA and elsewhere. The revisionist study in North America of Third World art, particularly that of revolutionary movements in Latin America, also experienced a boom beginning in the 1970s with the noteworthy articles of Cecilia Klein and numerous students who studied with her at UCLA (such as, Stacie Widdiefield, Leonard Folgarait, Tom Cummins, and Holly Barnet). In the 1990s, there were some refreshing as well as rigorous new examples of "critical art history," which interrelate Western and non-Western art, produced by such emerging scholars as Stephen Eisenman, Barbara McCloskey, Alejandro Anreus, Paul Jaskot, and Anthony Lee.

In the United Kingdom, the rise of the "social history of art" is associated most obviously with the two "classic" books from 1973 by T. J. Clark that drew upon many of the more dynamic threads of Marxism that have been discussed so far (Clark, 1973a and b). Subsequently, Clark published an article on Manet's *Olympia* that introduced a semiotics allied with Marxism into art historical analysis for the first time in an extended way anywhere. The one clear predecessor in the UK for Clark's work was to be found in the remarkable art criticism of John Berger, who published a series of studies during the 1960s on Picasso, Cubism, and the avant-garde before directing the momentous television show (and subsequent book) titled *Ways of Seeing* (1972). In drawing on the ideas of Walter Benjamin about mechanical reproduction, as well as those linked to contemporary feminism and Third World critiques of Western art in relation to colonialism, Berger made "critical art history" an international *cause célèbre* like no other scholar. Later, a group of scholars led by Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock

notably advanced the critical project of "social art history" along with the dialogue between feminism and Marxism. Then, in the 1980s, a group of British scholars published an anthology of articles under the heading of *The New Art History* (Rees and Borzello, 1986).

Finally, there were a few Althusserian scholars, originally in France, who sought to achieve in art history what Pierre Macherey had already accomplished in literary theory. This group included Michel Melot along with the Greek émigré Nicos Hadjinicolou, and would be linked at one point to the well-known work of Serge Guilbaut (Wallach, 1984).

In the end, though, scholars must remind themselves that from the beginning, a Marxist critique of Marxism has been an unavoidable part of this same process of critical inquiry, because Marx's theory of history also serves us as a history of that same theory. As Marx himself once observed, revolutionaries "criticize themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin afresh, deriding with merciless thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses, and wretchedness of their own first attempts" (*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), in Marx (1973), p. 150).[6]

Notes

1 E. P. Thompson (1978) *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, *Monthly Review*, pp. 4–5. For a look at Thompson's considerable significance to cultural studies, see Lynn Hunt (1989) *The New Cultural History*, University of California Press pp. 1–5.

2 Mikhail Bakhtin (1992) *The Dialogic Imagination*, University of Texas Press (originally published *c.*1930) and Paolo Freire (1981) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Continuum Books (originally published *c.*1961).

3 Perry Anderson (1996) "Brief remarks on the notion of 'uneven development'," in *Criteria and Indicators of Backwardness*, (ed.), Miroslav Hroch, Charles University pp. 47–59. As Anderson notes, it was Lenin, not Marx, who developed the concept of "uneven development" in a sustained way, as, for example, when he discussed this phenomenon in *Imperialism*: "Uneven economic and political development is an absolute law of capitalism."

4 For an instructive interchange between Hauser and Lukács, see Arnold Hauser (1978) *Im Gespräch mit Georg Lukács,* Beck, Munich, Verlag G. H. For three fine assessments by Anna Wessely of these Hungarian scholars, see A. Wessely (1970) "Die Aufhebung des Stilbegriffs – Frederick Antal," *Kritische Berichte*, 4(2/3), 16–37; A. Wessely (1990) "Simmel's influence on Lukác's conception of the sociology of art," in *Georg Simmel and Contemporary Sociology*, (ed.), M. Kaern, Amsterdam, Kluwert, pp. 357–73; A. Wessely (1995) "Remarks on Hauser's *Philosophy of Art History*," in *Science, Mind, and Art*, (ed.), K. Gavroglu, Amsterdam, Kluwert, pp. 25–43.

5 See Martin Warnke (1970) and O. K. Werckmeister (1982).

6 For providing me with some timely constructive criticism, I need to thank Fred Orton and Alan Wallach. For being supportive of this project, I would like to thank Margery Amdur, Alejandro Anreus, Mark Antliff, Horst Bredekamp, Stephen Eisenman, Jonathan Harris, Patricia Leighten, and Barbara McCloskey.

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Chapter 22

Walter Benjamin and Art Theory

Howard Caygill

The contemporary significance of the Walter Benjamin's philosophy and cultural criticism lies in his radical and in many ways prescient investigation of the relationship between word and image. While the post-war reception of his work emphasized the linguistic theory underlying his cultural criticism it is now increasingly appreciated that his writings on art and aesthetics proposed in addition an original and philosophically provocative account of visual experience. His early writings during and immediately after the First World War pioneered the confrontation between visual and linguistic modes of experience that came to characterize his writings of the 1920s and 1930s. The most prominent and debated point at which Benjamin discusses the interaction between the visual and the linguistic modes of experience remains the theory of allegory developed in his book *Origins of German Tragic Drama* (1928), a theory whose roots in Benjamin's early philosophic and aesthetic writings and its development in his work of the 1930s is often not fully appreciated.

The tension between word and image that characterizes Benjamin's theory of allegory emerges from his early philosophic and aesthetic reflections upon the linguistic and visual character of experience. His extensive critique of Kant and Neo-Kantianism, developed during the second decade of the century in numerous fragments and in the essay *On The Programme of the Coming Philosophy* (1918), focuses on the theme of the character of experience. In his lectures on logic Kant made a distinction between visual and linguistic models of experience and argued that experience itself consisted in the relationship between the visually founded intuition and the discursively founded concept. This problematic attempt to fuse visual and linguistic orders quickly met criticism from philosophers of language such as Hamann and Herder, who stressed the thoroughgoing linguistic character of experience in their 'metacritiques' of Kant, and from Hegel, who emphasized a development of the visual model in a 'phenomenology' of appearances. Benjamin was aware of both directions of criticism, and on some occasions seems to endorse the metacritical position, regarding experience as exclusively linguistic or visual. In the sizeable fragment *On Language as*

Such and on the Language of Man (1916) he appeals to a fusion of concept of intuition in the immediacy of the voice that names an object, while in *The Rainbow: A Dialogue on Phantasy* (1915) he dissolves the opposition of concept and intuition in the experience of colour. Yet these moments of fusion are rare lapses in an otherwise sustained recognition of the importance of the disjuncture and subsequent intersection between linguistic and visual experience, whether in graphic design, writing or allegory.

In the fragments on visual art from 1917 'Painting and the graphic arts' and 'Painting, or signs and marks' Benjamin begins his direct exploration of the nature of the relationship between word and image. The first essay hinges upon the transformations of the surface of inscription between the vertical and the horizontal planes. Benjamin seems to argue initially that the vertical plane is the surface characteristic of painting, the horizontal plane the surface characteristic of reading, regarding each as two different 'cross-sections' of reality. However, he also points to 'conflict of inner meaning' when a work produced on a horizontal surface is viewed vertically – such as children's drawings – and hints that this conflict is to be regarded positively. The second fragment continues to distinguish between painting and the graphic mark but no longer in terms of the orientation of the surfaces of inscription but in terms of the act of inscription itself. Linear, graphic inscription generates its surface by marking out an area while painting generates surface by means of juxtaposition. The latter construction of a visual field stands in a difficult relation to linguistic experience, since the set of coloured marks that make up a painting can be related to the word, whether as title or composition, but only in an indirect and allusive way. While the understanding of the nature of the relationship between word and image remained abstract in the fragments on painting, it assumed during the 1920s an increasingly historical character as Benjamin's interests turned to what was specific about the experience of Modernity.

The richness of Benjamin's thoughts on the historical relationship between word and image may be seen in his two diverse but complementary books from 1928: *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and *One Way Street*. The first explores the German *Trauerspiel* ('play of mourning') of the period following the Reformation, a period which Benjamin acknowledged as crucial in the development of modern capitalism (see *Capitalism as Religion*, 1921). Benjamin develops an analysis of allegory that describes it as the necessarily and unredeemably incomplete relation of word and image, and then traces its presence through the aesthetic strategies of the Baroque dramatists. Benjamin's presentation of an allegorical aesthetic of ruin, one that emphasizes the structural discrepancy between what is seen and what is said, marks a self-conscious break with the tradition of idealist aesthetics. The latter, for Benjamin exemplified by Goethe, regarded the work of art in terms of the concept of the symbol, as the site for the revelation of the eternal in the temporal.

Benjamin's historically specific claim that Baroque allegorical drama thematizes the disjuncture between appearance and meaning in the early modern

period is extended in *One Way Street* to the reflection upon contemporary metropolitan (specifically Berlin and Paris) experience. In *One Way Street* Benjamin extends the analysis of allegory out of the realm of art, albeit the noncanonical German *Trauerspiel*, into the broad visual culture of metropolitan modernity – providing allegorical analyses of postage stamps, advertisements, office furniture. Yet in addition to this invention of visual culture as a set of objects worthy of sustained analysis, Benjamin also develops a number of interesting ideas about the crossovers between 'high' and 'popular' visual cultures. In the section 'Arrested auditor of books' Benjamin traces the typographic innovations of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dès* to the 'graphic tensions of the advertisement' and those of Dada to the transformation of script in the contemporary visual culture of newspapers and magazines. Benjamin describes the latter transformation in terms that recall the analysis of graphics in *Painting and the Graphic Arts*: the horizontal plane upon which the book is read has been transformed under the pressure of technological and social change into the vertical plane of the newspaper, advertisement and movie screen. Benjamin anticipates the further development of three-dimensional text based on the card index – a form which he used in his Arcades Project – and finally even the qualitative transformation of communications into a purely visual language that abolishes the word. With the emergence of a new form of 'picture writing', the linguistic model of experience will be absorbed into the visual and become the province of powerful scribes and poets able to master the new hieroglyph and thus also, in an anticipation of the 'aestheticization of politics' argument, those who are in turn subject to them.

Benjamin elaborated the analysis of the relationship between 'high' and 'popular' culture proposed in *One Way Street* in his writings of the 1930s. The methodology underlying Benjamin's new understanding of cultural history was articulated in his critiques of two dominant traditions of cultural history. The first was the discipline of Formalist art history as developed by Heinrich Wölfflin, Jacob Burckhardt's successor at the University of Basel. Wölfflin narrowed Burckhardt's broad understanding of cultural history, which included both art and social history, to an analysis of the changes in artistic form. In the review essay *The Rigorous Study of Art* (1933) Benjamin, who attended Wölfflin's lectures as a student, developed an indirect critique of the formal method armed at its removal of the study of art from a broader cultural history. Yet Benjamin by no means endorses the dissolution of art into cultural history, subsequently criticizing such a project in his essay on the cultural historian Eduard Fuchs: 'Eduard Fuchs: collector and historian' (1937). Fuchs's work on the history of political pamphlets and erotic art regarded visual culture as symptomatic of culture as a whole, and proceeded by dissolving any form of discrimination between canonical and noncanonical works into the empirical collection of visual artefacts. Benjamin turns away the extremes of both abstract formalism and empiricism to a model of cultural history derived from the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl. The latter's practice of cultural history, notably in the book *Late*

Roman Art Industry much esteemed by Benjamin, steps outside of the canon and develops a material analysis of the technical conditions of production of works of art without losing sight of the work's formal character and the relationship between different categories of visual culture.

Benjamin applied these methodological prescriptions to his work on the fate of art in Modernity that continued the project announced in *One Way Street*. The dissolution of linguistic models of experience into visual 'picture writing' became extended into the concept of 'aestheticized politics' proposed in the essay 'The work of art in the epoch of its technical reproducibility' (1935–9). Here the theme of the fate of art is situated within a theory of technological change in which visual technologies invade the previously discursive spaces of politics. The origins of this aestheticized politics are traced to the Paris of the nineteenth century explored by Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* and the failures of the French aesthetic and political revolutionaries to transform both aesthetic and political practice. The analysis of the intersection of Modernity and Modernism in *The Arcades Project* forms the historical accompaniment to the influential argument for the decay of aura that forms the core of the 'Work of art' essay. Benjamin's notion of aura has often been misunderstood as loss by the work of art of its characteristic of uniqueness and distance under modern technologies of reproduction, but Benjamin is clear in the essay that this is but a 'symptomatic' phenomenon of larger processes of social change. If for Benjamin aura is less a property of works of art than of the social relations in which they are viewed, then the decay of aura refers to the dissolution of social relations through technology in general and the technologies of visual production and reproduction in particular. It is on the premise of the increasingly visual character of experience produced by technology that Benjamin closes the 'Work of art' with the choice between the aestheticized politics of Futurism and the politicized art exemplified by the Epic Theatre of Brecht. The future of aestheticized politics dissolves discursive spaces such as 'politics' and replaces them by visually produced cults of total domination while that of the politicization of art involves the creation of new discursive spaces through the transformation of visual technology.

Benjamin sees a number of possible strategies for the 'politicization of art', or the reintroduction of linguistic, discursive elements into a visually dominant model of experience. One, perhaps the most conservative version of politicized art, is represented by Brecht's Epic Theatre. Benjamin claims that the use of allegory in Brecht's drama confronts word with image and transforms the audience from the passive viewers of a spectacle to an active and differentiated group of discussants. Such a transformation still takes place in the theatre, that is, within the arena of 'high art' but it by no means exhausted Benjamin's understanding of politicized art. Another approach looked to the marginal and excluded elements of artistic work such as illustrated chambermaids' stories and illustrated children's literature. Benjamin regards these popular forms as heirs to the tradition of baroque allegory, seeing the allegorical illustrations of children's books as incitements to dialogue and to an active relationship to the image

(see for example *The World of Children's Books*, 1926). The possibility that images can provoke dialogue through allegory rather than close it down through symbolism also informs a third notion of politicized art developed by Benjamin in his work on photography (*A Little History of Photography*, 1931) and film as well as in *The Author as Producer* (1934). This line of argument suggests that visual technologies can be used not only to close down existing spaces of discursivity but can also be used to open new ones. The creation of images by the technologies of photography and film do not only create passivity and spectacle, but also through a technologically informed mode of perception pose questions that require new forms of discursive response.

Benjamin's analysis of word and image began in a critique of Kant's concept of experience and developed into a philosophically informed cultural analysis supplemented by a cultural history of modern experience. The tension between visual and linguistic models of experience, aggravated by modern technical and social conditions formed the basic intuition of his work. However, its continuing inspiration for contemporary cultural theory lies not only with this intuition, but perhaps more with the detailed way in which it was elaborated in the concrete analyses of canonical works of modern art and literature and extended to the extracanonical works of popular visual culture.

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Chapter 23

Bakhtin and the Visual Arts[1]

Deborah J. Haynes

Since Bakhtin's writings consistently began to appear in print in the 1960s, his name has often been associated with concepts such as "carnival," developed in *Rabelais and His World*, and "dialogue" or "dialogism," developed in *The Dialogical Imagination*. But concentration on the carnivalesque or the dialogic has tended to skew the adaptation of Bakhtin's work by scholars in a wide range of scholarly disciplines. Among the disciplines in which scholars have fruitfully engaged his ideas are: communication and media studies, composition, cultural studies, education and educational theory, ethics, film and television, law and critical legal studies, linguistics and philosophy of language, literature, medicine and studies on aging, multicultural studies, philosophy, political theory, psychology and psychoanalysis, religion, sociology, theater and performance, and urban studies. Curiously, art historians, art theorists, and critics have been slow to adapt his concepts to analyses of visual culture and the visual arts.

However, the philosophical language developed by Bakhtin – from his earliest published essays in the 1920s to his last notes in the early 1970s – contributes greatly to aesthetics, and it offers a new set of questions with which to query visual art. Whether interpreting Russian icons, Russian Modernism, Impressionist and Postimpressionist painting, or contemporary art, his ideas generate significant new insights. This chapter offers a brief overview of Bakhtin's understanding of aesthetics and discusses specific concepts that are useful for the interpretation of works of art.

Aesthetics

Although there is no clearly defined and universally understood definition of aesthetics in the present day, Bakhtin inherited modern aesthetic theories. He actively tried to refute formalist Kantian aesthetics; and he vehemently challenged the expressivist theories of German Neo-Kantians such as Theodor Lipps. Unlike both Kantians and Neo-Kantians, however, Bakhtin shunned orderly sys-

tematic thought. An analysis of his writing would suggest that he worked out his ideas by following the fragmentary meanderings of thought. Most aesthetic theories are concerned with the category of beauty, which is visible in nature and art, as in a glorious sunrise or in a photography or painting of a sunrise. Beauty may be less visible, or even invisible, in moral and intellectual activity, where cogency and coherence are a priority. These, of course, have their own inherent beauty, but this is different from beauty that is obvious in one's perception. Some give priority to the aesthetic object or work of art. Others privilege the perceiving subject, the viewer who looks and experiences. Bakhtin focused on the aesthetics of the creative process itself, on the activity of the artist or author who creates.

Since Alexander Baumgarten coined the term "aesthetics" in the 1730s, it has remained an ambiguous philosophical category. For Baumgarten, and for Kant who followed and expanded upon his ideas, aesthetics had to do with sensory knowledge or sensory cognition, which included but was not limited to the problem of beauty. Considered broadly, Bakhtin's interpretation of aesthetics fits into such a definition. He was concerned with how humans give form to their experience: how they perceive an object, text, or another person, and how they shape that perception into a synthesized whole. But Bakhtin did not focus upon beauty; rather, he developed an unusual vocabulary for describing the process by which we literally author one another, as well as artifacts such as texts and works of art. Concepts such as answerability and dialogue, outsideness and the chronotope, and unfinalizability were central to Bakhtin's aesthetics.

Still, Bakhtin never defined aesthetics explicitly. His early essays, especially "The problem of content, material, and form in verbal art," contain his most sustained treatment of philosophical aesthetics (Bakhtin, 1990, pp. 257–325). Following Kant and Neo-Kantians such as Hermann Cohen, Bakhtin treated the aesthetic as a sphere in which the cognitive–theoretical and ethical–practical spheres may be brought together. But he pressed further than Kant in defining their activity. For Bakhtin, each of these spheres describes reality differently. By assuming primacy, cognition tends to be falsely separated from ethical evaluation and the aesthetic organization of reality. Unavoidably, if we try to establish cognition as a pure and unique process, we get caught in both value judgments and aesthetic decisions. The realm of ethical action differs from the cognitive, because here one encounters conflict over moral duty or obligation, but it cannot be separated from cognitive functioning. Consequently, neither cognition nor action alone can provide a foundation for philosophy.

For Bakhtin, the aesthetic sphere is fundamentally different from the other two, because in artistic creation reality and life interpenetrate with art. As he wrote:

> Aesthetic activity does not create a reality that is wholly new. Unlike cognition and performed action, which create nature and social humanity, art celebrates, adorns, and recollects. . . . It enriches and completes them, and above all else it creates the concrete intuitive unity of these two worlds. It places man in nature . . . it humanizes nature and naturalizes man. (Bakhtin, 1990, pp. 278–9)

This statement articulates why Bakhtin focused on the aesthetic dimension of life. By unifying nature and humanity (and cognition and action), aesthetics could become the basis for a new approach to philosophy.

Bakhtin understood aesthetics as a "sub-function" or sub-category of the broader category of architectonics, as Michael Holquist has observed (in Bakhtin, 1990, pp. xxiii–xxiv). Like aesthetics, architectonics is not a strict formal cognitive structure, but it describes how relationships between self and other, self and object, self and world are structured. As Holquist wrote, the architectonic activity of authoring or building a text parallels the activity within life of building a self (Holquist, 1990, p. 64). Both are structures in a sense, though the first leaves physical evidence, while the second is often a hidden process. Bakhtin's approach to aesthetics is thus unique. It is based not only on categories such as the aesthetic (the aesthetic attitude or aesthetic object) or aesthetic values (truth, goodness, or beauty), but also on the phenomenology of self–other relations, relations that are embodied in actual bodies, in space and time. In some of his essays Bakhtin treated traditional aesthetic categories such as detachment, empathy, isolation, and the aesthetic object, as well as theories of art and the relationship of art and morality. But in discussing each of these categories and topics, he focused on the unique human being, located spatially and temporally and thus having a particular relationship to all other persons, objects, and events in the world. An analysis of Bakhtin's writing demonstrates that he was compelled to understand the nature of these interrelationships.

Humans engage in aesthetic activity in order to express and to shape perception and experience. Bakhtin called such activity "authoring," another name for creative activity. He did not limit his interpretation of authorship to literary texts, but he saw this as a process involving other persons and nature. Although he wrote much about literature, he occasionally mentioned works of art. To author, in Bakhtin's vocabulary, is to create. But just as he avoided clear definitions of aesthetics and creativity, Bakhtin never produced a systematic theory of the creative process. In fact, his early essays are both an implicit and explicit critique of unified and ordered systems. In "Toward a philosophy of the act" Bakhtin used the term theoretism (also translated as theoreticism) to describe his aversion to unified and orderly structures or systems (Bakhtin, 1993).

While Bakhtin's critique of theoretism was neither sustained nor systematic, it is pertinent to consider in relation to theories of art in general. In "Toward a philosophy of the act," Bakhtin was adamant about the limitations of theory. "Any kind of practical orientation of my life within the theoretical world is impossible," he wrote:

> The theoretical world is obtained through an essential and fundamental abstraction from the fact of my unique being and from the moral sense of that fact "as if I did not exist". . . . It cannot determine my life as an answerable performing of deeds, it cannot provide any criteria for the life of practice, the life of the deed. (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 9)

Bakhtin made two interrelated assertions here. On the one hand, theory cannot provide the basis for responsible action in the world. Immersion in the theoretical too often takes place at the expense of the everyday practical realm. Theory does not translate directly or easily into daily life and experience. On the other hand, a specific act or deed (*delo* or *postupok*) does provide a basis for creating an adequate orientation in life. Where theoretical arenas do not provide a standpoint for determining the meaning of life, specific acts do. Bakhtin identified theoretism, his name for all kinds of theories isolated from action, as the enemy. Nevertheless, his resistance did not preclude writing theoretical texts. In many of his essays Bakhtin avoided systematic and practical analyses of individual texts and authors, but he articulated the basis of his aesthetics and his notion of creativity.

Concepts for Interpreting Visual Arts

Bakhtin's ideas – answerability, dialogue, monologism, polyphony, outsideness, chronotope, the carnivalesque, unfinalizability, and heteroglossia, to name but a few – not only offer scholars categories for aesthetics, but also for analyzing visual art. Whether describing the breakdown of traditional genres and the reemergence of new narrative structures in contemporary art or creating taxonomies for interpreting works of art in relation to one another, his ideas are enormously generative. In what follows, I indicate possibilities and directions for such analysis by referring primarily to painting, but Bakhtin's concepts are widely applicable to other media within the visual arts.

Any discussion of the usefulness of Bakhtin's ideas must begin with a brief description of his understanding of the phenomenology of the self and self–other relationships, which he articulated with the concepts of answerability and the dialogic. Unlike some of his contemporaries such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Henri Bergson, Bakhtin's goal was not to create a moral or philosophical system. Instead, most of his essays are predicated on the presupposition that the human being is the center around which all action in the real world, including art, is organized. In his writing, the 'I' and the 'other' are the fundamental categories of value that make all action and creativity possible, as in the work of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas.

In Bakhtin's early essays this sense of the relationship of self and other was expressed with the concept of answerability. Art and life answer to each other much as human beings answer each other's needs and inquiries in time and space. Answerability was his way of naming the fact that art, and hence the creative activity of the artist, is always related, answerable, to life and lived experience. For him, the idea that we are answerable, indeed obligated, through our deeds is the basis of the architectonic structure of the world and the basis of artistic creativity. Thus, his interpretation of creativity emphasized the profound moral obligation we bear toward others. Such obligation is never solely theoretical, but

is an individual's concrete response to actual persons in specific situations. Because we do not exist alone, as isolated consciousnesses, our creative work is always answering the other. Answerability contains the moral imperative that the artist remain engaged with life, that the artist answer for life. At every point Bakhtin insisted upon obvious ethical aspects of creativity.

To what extent can we speak about answerability in individual paintings or artworks? Answerability, as responsibility or moral obligation toward others and expressed as an artist's concrete response to actual persons in specific situations, may seem obvious, as when artists such as Leon Golub and Nancy Spero address social and political issues. It may also be irrelevant, if an artist is most concerned with commercial success. But nearly all art is answerable in the sense that it evolves in relation to history and historical artifacts, to personal experience and reflection, and to identifiable formal issues.

Whereas answerability was a broad concept in his early essays, Bakhtin developed a more linguistic interpretation of this process in his book on Dostoevsky, where he began writing about dialogue and the dialogic. The concept of dialogue lends itself to facile application, because everyone has a common-sense understanding of what it is. An individual talks. Another person listens and responds. In a work of art, an artist enters into dialogue (in actual, historical, or mythological time) and expresses something about a place, person, or event. Bakhtin, however, meant more that this. As Caryl Emerson and Gary Saul Morson have shown, he used the concept of dialogue and the dialogic in at least three distinct ways (Morson and Emerson, 1990, pp. 130–1). First, dialogue refers to the fact that every utterance is by nature dialogic. An utterance can never be abstract, but must occur between two persons: speaker and listener, creator and audience, artist and viewer. It is always directed at somebody in a living, concrete, unrepeatable set of circumstances. For instance, a Russian icon is directed toward the Orthodox believer. The paintings of Claude Monet may be interpreted as a dialogue with his contemporaries, artists such as Auguste Renoir, Edouard Manet, Berthe Morisot, James Whistler, and John Singer Sargent, and with his critics and dealers. Richard Long's environmental and site-specific installations may be interpreted as a profound dialogue with the physical environment. This range of dialogues shows that the self is never autonomous, but always exists in a nexus of formative relationships with persons, places, or events that are reflected in an artwork.

Dialogue understood as utterances that are directed to someone in a unique situation can be either monologic or dialogic. This is the second way in which Bakhtin used the term. Although his discussions sometimes lack clarity, monologism means that dialogue becomes empty and lifeless. As he wrote in 'Notes made in 1970–71': 'Take a dialogue and remove the voices . . . remove the intonations . . . carve out abstract concepts and judgments from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness and that's how you get dialectics' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 147). Bakhtin argued that modern thought, including literature and art, has been dominated by a narrow dialectical mono-

logism and by monologic conceptions of truth. Dostoevsky, he claimed, was the first truly polyphonic writer, who thought through paradoxes, differing points of view, and unique consciousnesses. To be polyphonic, communication and social interaction must be characterized by contestation rather than automatic consensus.

Even though the word polyphonic refers to sound, can we read brushstrokes within a painting or chisel marks on a stone sculpture as polyphonous? I would suggest that the unique visual contest of color or directionality of marking in an artwork can express a dialogic and polyphonic sensibility. Colors meet and interact. Complex lines together define three-dimensional form. Analogously, there is an implicit dialogue in any artist's serial procedure, where a similar scene is painted under differing conditions, or the same form is sculpted numerous times. To use Monet as an example again, in Bordighera on the Mediterranean coast, he painted from slightly different vantage points and under differing conditions in order to record objective changes in weather, lighting, the sea, and vegetation. His series of paintings of grainstacks from 1890 were the result of these experiments on the Mediterranean. Later, in Venice he experimented with new approaches in order to eliminate time as a variable in his paintings, by concentrating on the interrelationships of atmosphere, light, and color.

Polyphony presupposes the third and most general sense of dialogue. Bakhtin understood life itself as dialogue:

> To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293)

Dialogue, therefore, is epistemological. Only through it do we know ourselves, other persons, and the world. Working with paint and canvas, with chisels and stone, with earth and sticks, or only with voice and body in a solo performance piece, an artist engages in a dialogue with perception and shares knowledge about the world.

Works of art therefore may express not only a profoundly answerable and dialogic relationship with persons and with the environment, but they may also be interpreted in relation to time, duration, and change. Although he did not create a typology of time, Bakhtin wrote about "small time" and "great time," which are related to Fernand Braudel's concept of *longue durée*. A work of art considered in "small time" would be examined in relation to its present context, as well as the recent past and foreseeable future. The category of "great time" is more useful for understanding cultural artifacts and whole cultures. "Great time" means the "infinite and unfinalized dialogue in which no meaning dies" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 169). By these definitions, the canonical works of art history exist in such great time, while the artworks created by contemporary artists in their

studios inhabit small time. However, the ability to discern how an artwork exists in time is based not on a grand historical metanarrative, but on a nuanced interpretaton of outsideness and the chronotope.

With the concept of outsideness, Bakhtin tried to show that both self and other are knowable because of the boundaries that frame and define the self over against others and the world. The artist's creative activity is also possible only because of these boundaries. Working at the temporal and spatial boundaries of the outer body, as well as at the axiological boundaries of inner life, an artist creates new visions. This is especially clear when considering both historical traditions and contemporary examples of landscape painting, photography, and sculpture. In order to understand fully the effects of urbanization and globalization, for example, we need an other, an outside vantage point that functions to demonstrate both what cities do and do not offer. Artists who represent the rural, country life, and wilderness – from John Constable and Thomas Cole to Alfredo Jaar and Noboru Tsubaki – provide that outside standpoint.

Where dialogue describes the process and practice of communication and relationship among selves or objects, the concept of the chronotope describes the time/space nexus in which life exists and creativity is possible (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 84–258). The idea of the chronotope is fairly easy to understand. There is no experience outside of space and time, both of which always change. Subjectivity dictates that an artist create objects that are always constituted differently. The fact that all conditions of experience are determined by space and time, which are themselves variable, means that every artwork exists in a unique chronotope. Within any situation there may be many different chronotopes, values, and beliefs, and these derive from actual social relations.

How do we gain understanding of a chronotope different from our own? Critics and historians of art unavoidably must wrestle with this. If a work of art is only understood in relation to the local and particular, then it will be of narrow artistic or scholarly significance. An art historian or critic (and a viewer in general) must recognize not only his or her own chronotope, but also the unique chronotopes of the artist and object. Only then can one give an object a place in great time. An historian therefore straddles two chronotopes, his or her own and the historical context of the work.

Bakhtin tried to demonstrate this intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships in literature through discussions of literary genre. For instance, the epic (Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or the *Gilgamesh* story) is characterized by a chronotope that values a national heroic past; it remains rooted in tradition; and temporal distance separates it from the present. By contrast, the novel, with its worlds in the making, is usually rooted in more present experience and multilayered consciousness. The chronotope of the novel expresses an open-ended relationship to the future that is lacking in the epic.

In analyzing works of visual art, from painting and film to graphic design and comic strips, such literary insights are useful, as Jay Ladin has shown in his essay "Fleshing out the chronotope" (in Emerson, 1999). We could describe differ-

ences in the way a chronotope in painting is expressed, depending upon its genre. History painting expresses a different self-consciousness about historical events than does landscape painting, portraiture (including self-portraiture), or images of religious or mythological subjects. We might compare the historical chronotopes expressed in Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784) and Eugène Delacroix's *Death at Sardanapolous* (1827–8); or we might compare the mythological chronotopes in Ivan Kramskoi's *Christ in the Wilderness* (1872) and Thomas Cole's series, *The Voyage of Life* (1842). When a particular moment is evoked through the image of a place or person, it expresses a unique chronotope, as would be obvious in comparing Ilya Repin's portraits of the writer Leo Tolstoy (1887 and 1901). As in the case of literary texts, each genre of painting could be examined in terms of the distinct ways in which time and space are represented.

We also might examine chronotopic motifs that function as condensed reminders of particular kinds of time and space. For instance, images of roads, of structures such as churches, castles, or bridges, and of elements in the natural world such as trees or mountains all have metaphorical resonances. Each image is saturated with a specific sense of time and history and carries all of the specificity associated with a particular faith, family, journey, or environment. To speak of chronotopic motifs offers another way of articulating how images carry symbolic meanings. In the end, the chronotope helps us to explain the fact that everything happens not only within a nexus of answerable dialogues, but also that no artifact of culture ever exists outside of a particular historical place and time.

An example of Bakhtin's own sustained interpretation of chronotopes and chronotopic motifs can be seen in his 1965 study of Rabelais, *Rabelais and His World*, which was first translated and published in English in 1968. One could say, for instance, that he studied a French novelist from the 1530s in order to relate his insights to the 1930s in Russia. In this book, he moved away from moralistic nineteenth-century readings of carnival and the grotesque and toward a reconstruction of the folk culture of carnivalesque laughter. He had also explored such themes in essays such as "forms of time and of the chronotope" (in *The Dialogic Imagination*), but in *Rabelais and His World* carnival became an example of a genre type. In carnival, and in folk culture more generally, official institutions as well as definitions of the sacred are intermittently transcended or reversed. Bakhtin's reading of Rabelais cannot be understood as solely an historical study of carnival, for he sought to show that the world is a place where the physical drama of the body (through birth, coitus, eating, drinking, evacuation, and death) is played out. In analyzing phenomena such as laughter, masks, grotesque images of the body, and various forms of debasement, Bakhtin created an encyclopedia of chronotopic motifs and of folk culture more generally, showing that the body is actually the foundation of society and of our relationships to nature. This work has been extremely useful to scholars analyzing historical artworks such as Giotto's *Last Judgment* (Miles, 1989, pp. 147–50), Diane

Arbus's modern photography (Budick, 1997), and the work of Ukrainian artist Ilya Kabakov (Tupitsyn, 1996), to name but a few.

Unfinalizability is one of the most significant core concepts in Bakhtin's writing, and it appears in a variety of contexts. As Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson have written:

> [unfinalizability] . . . designates a complex of values central to his thinking: innovation, "surprisingness," the genuinely new, openness, potentiality, freedom, and creativity. . . . His paraphrase of one of Dostoevsky's ideas also expresses his own: "Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate work of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future." (Morson and Emerson, 1990, pp. 36–7)

Unfinalizability may help us to articulate complex answers to questions about particular works of art. When is a work finished? Can it ever be truly finished? When is a critical perspective or audience reception complete? The fact that sculptures such as the Samothracian *Nike* or paintings such as Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* have continued to generate scholarly and public interest for centuries verifies the central insight of Bakhtin's concept.

In Bakhtin's formulation, the sense of freedom and openness that is encompassed by the idea of unfinalizability applies not only to works of literature and art, but it is also an intrinsic condition of our daily lives. Such creativity is ubiquitous and unavoidable, and, as noted earlier, it should not be separated from one's responsibility toward others and toward the world. What can ever be fully finalized? There always is a tentative quality to one's work, one's action, and to life itself. Unfinalizability has at least two distinct levels: the ways we need others in order to finalize the self; and the ultimate unfinalizability of all things, events, and persons. Art and life are ultimately open-ended. Even though a person's life is finalized in death, that person's work lives on, to be extended and developed by others, an insight we certainly know vis-à-vis important historical artworks. The creative process, too, is unfinalizable, except insofar as an artist says, somewhat arbitrarily, "I stop here." Precisely because it is always open to change and transformation, artistic work can be a model for the possibility of change in the larger world outside the studio. Indeed, unfinalizability gives us a way to speak about the problems of representing the changing world through the artistic lens of our diverse and ever-changing subjectivities.

Concluding Remarks

Bakhtin's writing anticipated many contemporary concerns; and it predates a variety of movements within literary, visual, and cultural studies, such as Neo-Historicism, Poststructuralism, and Postmodernism. This is a key to his ongoing significance within many scholarly disciplines. In late essays and notes written in

the 1970s before he died, Bakthin touched on numerous issues that need further interpretation by art historians and theorists of art. For example, his ideas about creative understanding and the uniqueness of the humanities, as well as his broad interpretation of genres, could be usefully developed.

Bakhtin's theoretical vocabulary moves us from a narrow interpretation of aesthetic theory to broader considerations of the relationship of art and life. To see another life for its significance *qua* life: this should be the goal of aesthetic experience and of art according to Bakhtin. Perhaps the most significant contribution of Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas to contemporary aesthetics, art theory, and art history is his affirmation that art must exist in an integral relationship with life. Art for its own sake is mere artifice, but art connected to life affirms the world-forming potential of the artist's creative vision and creative voice.

Note

1 Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin was born in 1895 in Orel, Russia, and grew up in Vilnius, a Lithuanian town called 'the Jerusalem of the North' because of its rich Jewish intellectual heritage. He studied philology and classics at Petrograd University between 1914 and 1918, and later lived in small Russian cities such as Nevel, Vitebsk, Kustanai, Saransk, Savelovo, as well as Leningrad and Moscow. Bakhtin's years in Nevel and Vitebsk overlapped with the period that Marc Chagall and Kasimir Malevich worked there, although it seems that he did not know them. For most of his life, Bakhtin was active in both literary and philosophical circles, but in the mid-1920s he contracted osteomyelitis, which limited his mobility. During periods of harsh repression, Bakhtin and his wife Elena Aleksandrovna were exiled from Moscow; he taught at high school and worked as a bookkeeper. Bakhtin was eighty years old when he died in 1975; and only since his death has his oeuvre become widely known throughout the world.

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Chapter 24

Peirce's Visuality and the Semiotics of Art

Michael Leja

Art historians and interpreters of visual culture have found invaluable certain elements of Charles Sanders Peirce's writings on semiotics. They frequently have invoked his tripartite definition of a sign (a sign stands for some object to an interpretant, which is to be understood as another sign rather than an interpreter) and his discrimination of three types of signs differing in terms of the relation of the sign to its object (index: for which the relation between sign and object is real and physical, which gives the sign the status of evidence for its object; icon: in which that relation is based on resemblance; and symbol: based on convention). For at least two reasons these borrowings from Peirce's semiotics warrant critical scrutiny. First, they are hyperselective: only a very few and narrowly circumscribed elements of his vast semiotic theory have been appropriated, and those repeatedly. Second, they lack historical consideration: rarely are these selected elements acknowledged to belong to a philosophical system – specifically a logic, an epistemology, and a metaphysics – that is at least temporally if not ideologically distant. In the vast majority of references, the lapse of a century more or less between Peirce's semiotic writings (composed between 1867 and 1914) and the art historical appropriation of them is a matter of no interest. The isolated borrowings are employed as if they were universally true or the latest word in semiotic theory. This chapter will argue that this standard manner of handling Peirce's magisterial but imperfect work has entailed some costs.

One obvious place to begin is at the points of contact between recent analysts and Peirce's theories. The appeal of the latter to the former has sometimes been explained as a matter of its accommodation of visual signs. Gilles Deleuze put it this way:

> If I use Peirce, it is because of his profound reflection on images and signs. Conversely, if a linguistically inspired semiology troubles me, it is because it suppresses the notion of the image and of the sign. It reduces the image to an utterance, which seems very strange to me. (Deleuze, 1989, p. 20)

To what specific features of Peirce's writings might Deleuze be pointing here? What is the character of the reflection on images – or the "visuality" – in Peirce's semiotics? How does it distinguish between images and utterances?

Peirce himself would probably have agreed with the idea that his semiotics was fundamentally visual, and he would have meant by this more than that his categories of icon and index especially accommodated visual signs. He noted that he felt a strong orientation in his personal patterns of thought and reasoning toward graphic representation and visual symbols; he considered this an idiosyncrasy, part of what he called his "mental left-handedness," which separated him from most of his associates.

> I do not think I ever reflect in words: I employ visual diagrams, firstly, because this way of thinking is my natural language of self-communion, and secondly, because I am convinced that it is the best system for the purpose. (PCSP, 619, 1909)

This "natural" visuality had no bearing, apparently, on Peirce's experience of the visual arts. Not only was he relatively uninterested in the visual arts compared to other members of his social class, but he believed he was by nature unsuited to the study of art in the broader sense: he saw himself as deficient in certain innate traits of personality that incline one toward aesthetic feeling. Of the three types of people he discerned – men of sentiment (artists), practical men (businessmen and politicians), and seekers of truth (scientists and intellectuals) – he identified strongly with the last category. When he said there was little of the artist in him, there was pride as well as regret in the statement.

Was there a radical separation for Peirce between art and scientific analysis, or between aesthetics and logic, each having its own forms of visuality? His comments are inconclusive; but he apparently believed that his own highly developed and visual skills in logical reasoning and sign analysis carried little weight in the sphere of art. "I have a keen sense of beauty, entirely my own, and very decided, but utterly uncultivated; so that I can say nothing about this subject." Art, apparently, was principally a matter of beauty and feeling for Peirce, rather than signification, reference, and truth. Aesthetics and logic were discontinuous fields, and he was disinclined to try to bridge them.

Yet he wrote, "Every fine argument is a poem and a symphony – just as every true poem is a sound argument" (CPCSP, 5, 119). There would seem no chasm here. And in an 1871 essay he anticipated Erwin Panofsky by pointing out strong similarities between scholastic commentary and Gothic architecture. "If any one wishes to know what a scholastic commentary is like, and what the tone of thought in it is, he has only to contemplate a Gothic cathedral."[1]

Resolving these discrepancies will require closer examination of the visuality Peirce saw as characteristic of his own mind. His natural talent, in his own view, lay in the graphic representation of thoughts and arguments and diagramming relations among them. From his earliest years to his last, Peirce was engaged with systems for visualizing ideas and their relations.

In a letter to Lady Welby written in 1909, Peirce recalled a significant episode from his youth: "As a boy I invented a language in which almost every letter of every word made a definite contribution to its signification" (Hardwick, 1997, p. 95). The language apparently does not survive, perhaps because it was not completed, but Peirce tells us that it was prompted by his encounter with a book by John Wilkins titled *An Essay Towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language*, published in London in 1668. Wilkins's book was an attempt to develop a universal and philosophically grounded written language whose alphabet was to be configured not as conventional symbols but as "natural" signs. A language immediately accessible to all humans would be valuable for facilitating mutual commerce among the peoples of the world and spreading knowledge of religion, Wilkins noted. His project fits precisely Michel Foucault's description of the Enlightenment episteme, whose utopian dream was a perfectly transparent language (Foucault, 1994, esp. 104–10). Wilkins ultimately had to retreat from this objective, finding it essentially beyond him, but he did try to eliminate some of the arbitrariness from alphabetical letters by replacing them with a system of genus and species markers for concepts and things and with rules for further specification of variations within categories. Words became notations graphically signifying their objects based on their belonging to natural or logical categories. Like Wilkins's new language, Peirce's involved a classification of all possible ideas, and in this universalizing scope it anticipated his semiotics. Wilkins's effort to convert language into transparent visual signs also entailed considerable reflection upon signs, and it was no doubt an important contributor to Peirce's semiotics. "All Characters signify either *Naturally*, or by *Institution*. *Natural Characters* are either the Pictures of things, or some other *Symbolical* Representations of them . . ." (Wilkins, 1668, p. 386). Peirce's own semiotic categories relied heavily on the possibility of discrimination between natural and conventional signs, and he shared Wilkins's belief that pictures were a principal form of natural signs. In Peirce's terms, a symbol could not be a natural sign, so he would have disagreed with the closing section of Wilkins's statement, unless a "natural symbolical representation" was to be understood as Peirce's index.

That Peirce attempted to build upon Wilkins's example tells us a great deal about the universalist, encyclopedic, and Enlightenment character of his thinking and about his attraction to graphic signification. His absolute confidence in scientific rationality and in the existence of natural orders that could be mapped through the rigorous application of logic and classification were extensions of Enlightment ideology. In its vast scope and its hyperarticulated classifications of signs, Peirce's semiotics belongs to such phenomena of modernity as the classificatory systems developed to organize the material culture of the planet for presentation at the World's Fairs, or Owen Jones's universal taxonomy of decoration, *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), or Bertillon's classification system for bodily forms (1888). Peirce tried to design a universal science of cognition and reasoning with classifications deduced from logical discriminations. His semiotics has an *a priori* structure, generated by taking all possible combinations

and variations of certain elements posited as fundamental.[2] Most applications of Peirce's semiotics to the interpretation of art utilize only his early description of three kinds of relations between signs and their objects. His later, more analytically precise and articulated typology, which distinguishes signs on the basis of their presentative character, representative character, and interpretative power (e.g., rhematic iconic qualisign, dicentic indexical sinsign) has not appealed to art historians.[3] The reasons for this are obvious: the better Peirce's discriminations suit the purposes of his logical project, the narrower they are and the less adaptable for artistic interpretation.

If Peirce failed at his youthful effort to surpass Wilkins, he did not give up devising graphic systems for diagramming visually all forms of reasoning and argument. In 1867 he began working to improve Boole's system of logical notations by expanding it to include the logic of relations. And in the 1890s he developed a system for diagramming propositions which evolved into his Existential Graphs, a source of considerable pride for Peirce at the end of his life.[4]

"Reasoning is dependent upon Graphical Signs," Peirce wrote. "By 'graphical' I mean capable of being written or drawn, so as to be spatially arranged. . . . I do not believe one can go very deeply into any important and considerably large subject of discussion" without using space as a field in which to arrange mental processes and images of objects (PCSP, 683, 1913). Peirce saw graphical signs as crucial aids to reasoning. As he wrote to Lady Welby: "I place a high valuation upon my [system of] Existential Graphs. . . . The use of it arises from its furnishing an icon of thought which in formal respects is of the highest exactitude" (Hardwick, 1997, p. 96). In Peirce's existential graphs, an "A" circumscribed by a line, all of which is enclosed by another boundary containing also a "B," is to be understood as signifying "if B, then A." Such notations signify by convention, but what is revealed through them is an accurate portrait of logic and reasoning in Peirce's view (Hardwick, 1977, p. 106). "My 'Existential Graphs' have a remarkable likeness to my thoughts about any topic of philosophy," he wrote (PCSP, 619). They were designed to make possible the spatialization of rationality and the visualization of thought and logic. It was toward this end that Peirce's engagements with visual and graphic representations were directed. At this time he labeled his principal field of endeavor "ideoscopy," which made explicit the linkage between ideas and visuality that he sought (Hardwick, 1977, p. 23).

Alongside and in between these early and late monumental projects, Peirce's papers give clear evidence of consistent interest in various forms of imaging and graphic signification. And the visual materials contained in them are not limited to symbolic alphabets and logical diagrams. He often experimented with eccentric script styles for his texts and arranged them in striking configurations – chirography – sometimes suggesting a baroque form of concrete poetry. And he apparently drew obsessively, over- and underlaying the texts and mathematical and logical formulas on his worksheets with pictographic drawings.

Peirce himself noted that he drew "incessantly," although, as he quickly added, "I have never drawn a prize" (PCSP, L387, 1896). I take this to mean that his alienation from the aesthetic was not compromised by such drawings. The pictographic drawings that survive in his papers appear primarily on worksheets and in notebooks; such drawings were evidently precluded from the finished, final copies of his handwritten texts. Unlike his existential graphs, which were featured in several of his publications, these drawings apparently represent visualizations Peirce considered personal and private, and they have not figured in the scholarly analysis of his work. The surviving worksheets are numerous enough to indicate that in at least some periods of his life, when Peirce's mind was at work, whether on mathematical equations or philosophical writings, images and visual signs permeated his production of texts. The worksheets show diagrams and texts mingled with repetitive doodles, obsessive scribbles, pictographs, and most commonly, caricatures of heads and figures (plate 24.1).

For the purposes of the present chapter, the interest of these drawings is primarily semiotic. The heads in plate 24.1 occupy the same semiotic world as the mathematical and diagrammatic signs that surround them; this continuity is nicely illustrated by the infinity sign that balances on a nose in the lower part of the upper left quadrant. Another sheet (plate 24.2), of unknown date, has a decidedly pictographic quality, which is to say that the drawings and their arrangement imply a one-to-one correspondence between image and word or concept, like the drawings contained in a rebus. One reads left to right from the top: anchor, key, flower, head, planet, and so on. On this particular sheet the correspondence of image and word is given an unusual literalization: from the algebraic equation involving powers of ax and bx at the upper left, the ax is isolated at the left margin, and it corresponds to two drawings of axes in the lowest register (and a third possible hand-held ax triangulated above the two lower ones). In fact, this sheet of drawings has been classified as a rebus by the cataloguers of Peirce's papers – a plausible guess, although I cannot solve the puzzle, nor have I found any documentary evidence corroborating such a purpose for it. What else could Peirce have been doing here, with these images arranged in horizontal registers? His interest in puzzles of all sorts is evident in his papers; he took playful pleasure in them at the same time that he was compelled to analyze them logically. Ultimately, however, the rebus interpretation will not hold for this sheet. The clustering of some of the subjects – four snakes in the upper right quadrant, three guns at middle left, several pots, cups, and vessels at upper left and in the center, and so on – and the rapid deterioration of the horizontal alignment argue powerfully against it. The evocation of a rebus through this arrangement of pictographs probably hinges on the intuition that a linguistic unit corresponds to each graphic unit, and that the totality of images, as with words, will add up to some coherent statement.

But while many of the pictographic forms do have a clear linguistic analogue, many do not. No viewer will have difficulty picking out images for which a single

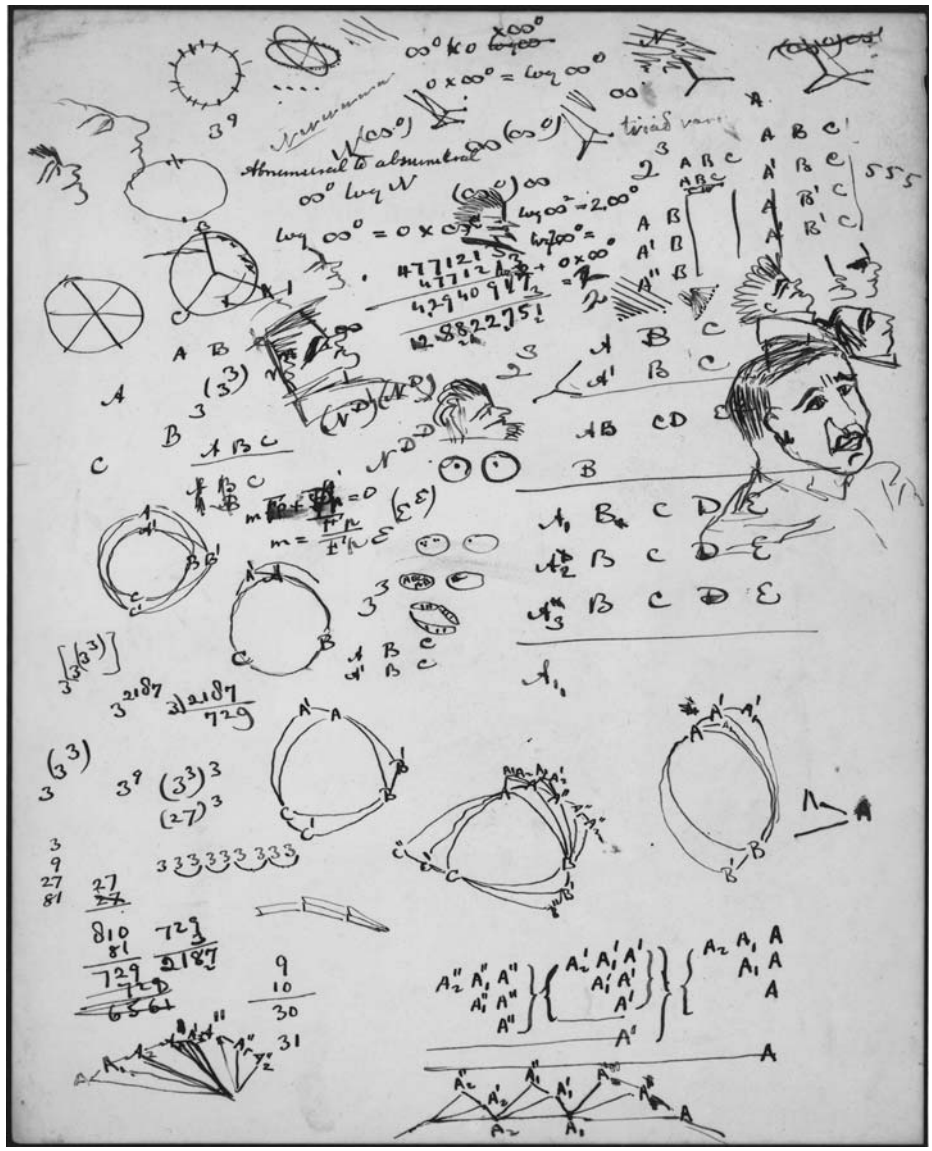


Plate 24.1 Charles Peirce, drawing. By permission of Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS CSP 1538

name is inadequate. Take the sun/flower/face at lower left, for example – a hackneyed combination, certainly, but also a strong contrast in terms of its multivalence with the image of Saturn in the top register. Indeed, instead of the rebus model, or even ideoscopy, the page makes more sense as a visual exploration of Peirce's semiotic categories. Arguably each of his categories is represented in the drawing – symbols (the conventionalized heart and sun), icons (throughout), and

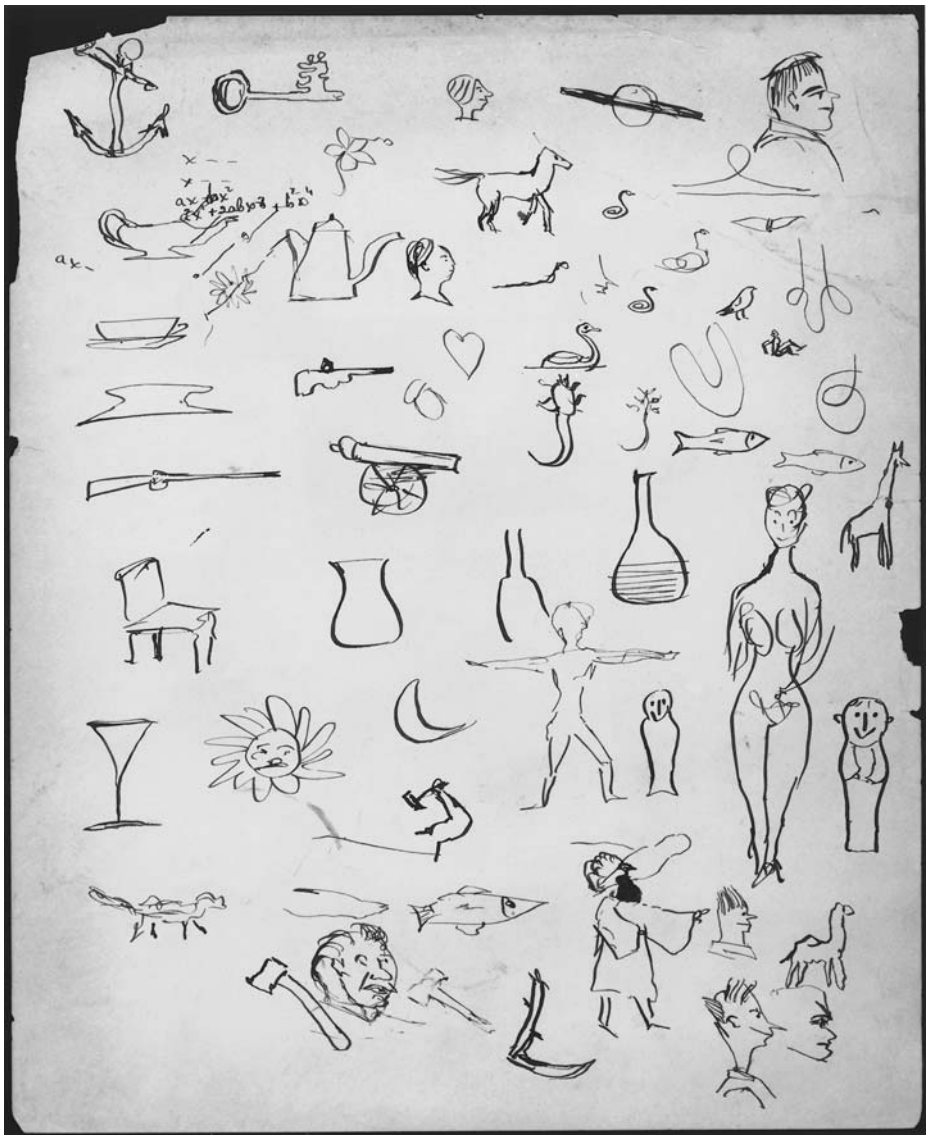


Plate 24.2 Charles Peirce, drawing. By permission of Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS CSP 1538

at least a few marks legible principally as scribbles, which may highlight the movements of pen and hand that produced them, thereby registering as indexes (one is placed above the fish and the giraffe at the right edge). Peirce shows himself sufficiently competent as a draftsman to make careful distinctions among similar signs: to differentiate horse from camel from giraffe in contour drawings,

and cannon from rifle from pistol, to metamorphose snake into swan, and to get some variation of facial types and expressions in his profile heads.

We tend first, I think, to read the majority of the pictographs as icons, and indeed, most do have some iconic dimension. But resemblance operates within a very narrow register here (note that none of the pictographs employs illusionism of any intensity), and its schematic character usually spills over into conventionalism. Most of the pictographs turn out on closer inspection to be hybrids of resemblance and convention, icon and symbol. The schematic drawing of a nude woman at lower right is an example of this which, moreover, confounds the categories further by trailing into indexical scribbles in the arms, feet, hair, and pelvic region. Peirce's pictographs, it turns out, test and subvert the boundaries of his categories. The animal at lower left is also a composite of iconic resemblance, symbolic convention, and indexical markings. The cluster of snakes charts the stages between sheer coiled line and pictograph of snake. What keeps the linear bow above and to the right of the snakes from reading as a snake? When does a line begin to bear resemblance to something, and does resemblance gravitate toward conceptual schema or contingent appearance? Look at the provocative juxtaposition of figures in the lower right quadrant, for example. Are the odd short characters flanking the nude woman to be interpreted as icons of toy men or symbols of humans?

The semiotically hybrid and ambiguous character of so many of the pictographs challenges the integrity and value of Peirce's categories. At the very least it indicates that even simple pictographs can be semiotically complex. Even in the restricted realm of diagrammatic visuality, images will be unruly. Peirce's drawings challenge the premise of the rebus, which works by flattening the significations of its images into discrete lexical meanings. By sometimes seeming to constitute a rebus but refusing to settle into a verbal solution, Peirce's pictographs evoke but resist flattening into utterance. If it is true, as F. Harrison wrote in 1882, that "many an ingenious picture is little but a painted rebus," it is also true that even the best rebuses are fragile containers for polysemic images. That is what makes them challenging and pleasurable exercises. The rebus and Peirce's drawings call attention to the ways that visual and verbal signs are suited to different kinds of semiotic work.

As Umberto Eco has pointed out, Peirce never treated his categories as rigid and exclusive containers for signs; most signs are categorically hybrid. The categories better describe strategies of signification than types of signs, according to Eco (Eco, 1985, p. 177). This proviso also reminds us that Peirce himself eventually devised a much more elaborate system than this for classifying signs. In practice, however, when Peirce treated the issue of the semiotic character of visual images in his writings, he tended to simplify matters. He sometimes invoked the visual arts as illustrations of his categories of signs, and when he did he generally treated them as the premier example of signification by resemblance. Pictures, and particularly portraits, were his model of likeness, and they figure far more prominently as illustrative examples for his category of icons than for

any other. In Peirce's writings, visual forms are rarely if ever recognized as having symbolic aspects. He did acknowledge that symbols may grow from other signs, particularly from likenesses or from mixed signs partaking of the nature of likenesses and symbols, but he did not examine the implications of this possibility for his other categories of signs (PCSP, 404). His pictographs offer much more vivid evidence of this complexity than his writings do.

The distinction between natural and conventional signs and the assumption that pictures differ from verbal symbols by operating through natural resemblance have been attacked powerfully by Nelson Goodman and W. J. T. Mitchell. Resemblance and conventionality are impossibly vague and inclusive criteria for categorizing signs, these analysts have argued; furthermore, they have complicated the concept of iconicity by recognizing its social and conventional dimensions. As Goodman puts it: "The often stressed distinction between iconic and other signs [is] transient and trivial" (Goodman, 1976, pp. 230–1). Some recent research in the cognitive sciences suggests that Goodman may go too far in dismissing resemblance as a particular mental process, but because resemblance can never be free of conventionality, his challenge stands. By Mitchell's account, Peirce is right to see that we cannot know anything without names, images, and representations, but his mistake is in thinking "that we can know the truth about things by knowing the right names, signs, or representations of them" (Mitchell, 1997, p. 92). A related critique can even be traced to Peirce's younger contemporary, Marcel Proust, writing on the subject of recognition:

> Our social personality is a creation of the thoughts of other people. Even the simple act which we describe as "seeing someone we know" is to some extent an intellectual process. We pack the physical outline of the person we see with all the notions we have already formed about him, and in the total picture of him which we compose in our minds those notions have certainly the principal place. In the end they come to fill out so completely the curve of his cheeks, to follow so exactly the line of his nose, they blend so harmoniously in the sound of his voice as if it were no more than a transparent envelope, that each time we see the face or hear the voice it is these notions which we recognize and to which we listen. (Proust, 1970, p. 20)

Although the expanded conception of iconicity Proust offers here is developed in relation to the recognition of an acquaintance in real life, it can as well be extended to painted and photographic portraits. Iconicity has a symbolic aspect; resemblance is permeated by social content. Eco's emphasis on the hybridity of Peirce's categories seems much too weak a defense against the challenges of these critiques.

I do not want to sound petty for noticing that throughout his writings Peirce's references to portraiture, photography, and pictures generally are unsophisticated, that they acknowledge few complexities in semiotic character and in the relation of image to subject, that they sometimes attribute a primitive semiotic status to pictures, and that they do not acknowledge the symbolic dimension of

images so prominent in his own drawings. Some of the most interesting aspects of visual signs were lost in Peirce's effort to discipline them. Such shortcomings in a body of work as formidable as Peirce's were no doubt partly indications that his priorities were elsewhere. For him, visual materials were bits of data to be used comparatively to fill out his typology of signs. They helped to enrich and elucidate his efforts to improve logic and bring truth within reach of reasoning. Peirce was far more interested in discerning what particular combination of indexes and icons characterized a certain type of true proposition than he was in generating a semiotic typology that would be useful for the analysis of visual arts. "Logic has in view only the possible truth and falsity of signs" (Hardwick, 1977, p. 199). The value of his theory is much less clear when truth and falsity are not at issue.

Instead of Peirce's visuality, it seems we must recognize the multiple visualities developed in his diagrammatic systems, his textual analysis of visual signs, and his drawings. Visuality is conflicted in Peirce's semiotics. One of its effects is to homogenize image and utterance within the rubric of the table of signs. This diagrammatic visuality renders all activities of mind equally susceptible to a visual spatialization, which reveals Peirce's semiotics as a sort of apparatus for generating a sign-classification table. In this respect, his semiotics was much more like his existential graphs than is at first apparent. Both are logical devices which mobilize visualization in pursuit of truthful understanding of the congruent orders of world and mind. In the visualized table that results, images paradoxically are assigned a particular, narrow semiotic role – they are ghettoized as types of primitive natural signs, a ghettoization sustained in most of Peirce's written analysis of visual signs. But in his own drawings, images rebel and subvert this totalizing diagrammatic order. In Peirce's unknown scribbles, visual signs exhibit a disorderliness that moves beyond hybridity toward undermining distinctions of natural, conventional, and evidentiary signs.

Is there room in Peirce's semiotics for a more interesting account of visual signs than he himself offers? If we disregard temporarily the limitations of the fundamental semiotic discriminations that Peirce took as indisputable and that situate his semiotics in the late nineteenth century, we may apply some internal pressure to the theory. One thing missing from the semiotic theory as a logical apparatus is a developed mechanism for assessing the effects on signs of one another. That such a device would be necessary is implicit in Peirce's notion of nested signs (PCSP, 339, sheet 239) and in a passage contained among the drafts of his letters to Lady Welby – a passage which did not appear in any of the letters he actually sent:

> Consider for example a blank-book. It is meant to be written in. Words written in that in due order will have quite another force from the same words scattered accidentally on the ground, even should these happen to have fallen into collections which would have a meaning if written in the blank-book. (Hardwick, 1977, p. 195)

In other words, the significance of the words in question is not just a matter of their ordering but also of their placement within a book, which is not only a collection of signs but itself a sign. Its form – covers, binding, and pages – signifies by establishing expectations concerning other signs contained within. An arrangement of signs encountered in the world will have a different "force" from the same arrangement placed in a book, Peirce writes. There is in this observation a valuable challenge to forms of semiotic (and formal, and ideological) interpretation that constitute discrete signs as objects of analysis having definable relations to signifieds regardless of enframing contexts of use. Moreover, we are justified in wondering whether Peirce's "force" may be understood as encompassing the typological identity of a sign. Might a sign's type vary with changes in location? Such an idea has profound implications for Peirce's semiotics. It could mean that a sign such as a book cover or a picture frame may change the meaning and status of any or all of the signs within its domain. Aesthetic space may have semiotic rules different from nonaesthetic space. If Peirce believed or intuited this, it may help us account for his sense of alienation from the aesthetic. It may also lead us to reconsider interpretive practices that directly apply Peirce's categories to visual art.

For example, one such application of Peirce's theories can be found in arguments about the place of indexicality in Modernist paintings. A popular view holds that from Manet to Monet to Cézanne and Van Gogh and onward to Pollock, avant-garde artists steadily reduced the iconicity of painted marks and magnified their indexicality. By the time we reach Pollock, lines and forms are pure indexes by virtue of being sheer traces of real movements of the artist's arm and hand. All iconic functions of his marks have been eliminated since they no longer register any claim to represent the appearances of things in the world. They are, rather, the indexical record of a performance.

This account of Modernism has distinct value, which too often has been obscured by unjustified conclusions. For example, in the early critical reception of Pollock and Abstract Expressionism, critic Harold Rosenberg probably knew nothing of Peirce's semiotics, but his description of "action painting" pointed the way toward understanding Abstract Expressionist forms as indexes of a performance. Rosenberg advised his readers to interpret the painted traces by envisioning the actions that made them and by responding to the painting as though to a dance or a theatrical performance. These reconstructed movements would help viewers discern the expressive and philosophical content of the works. Indexes, however, often reveal their physical causes only in the most general sense, as Snyder and Shiff have cautioned. One cannot reconstruct the gestures and techniques that produced Pollock's splatters from analysis of the marks themselves. Nor should his gestures themselves be imagined to be indexes of a psychic, emotional, or intellectual condition.

A second problem stems from the special immediacy and authenticity that distinguish indexes as signs in Peirce's account. These features have tended to reinforce the reading of Modernist art that portrays it as a specially direct form of

communication by virtue of its making the presence of the artist vivid and palpable in the work. The foil for this reading is contemporary academic art, understood as rooted in an iconicity turned hackneyed, formulaic, and remote from the world of experience (or, given the schematic idealization of much academic art, rooted in an equally hackneyed symbolism). In these terms, Modernism seems to represent authentic and direct representation in contrast to a heavily mediated academicism.

Finally, some interpreters have concluded that extreme indexicality eliminated metaphor and allusion from Modernist paintings and replaced these with pure literality. Versions of this argument have been made in relation to Pollock by a number of authors, including Payant, Shiff, and Krauss.

If we consider signs as subject to the pressure of semiotic interrelations, some difficulties engendered in the above arguments become clearer. Among the semiotic effects exerted over its field by the frame, or by the boundary of an unframed canvas, would be the contamination of indexes. The record of a gesture made in aesthetic space will be fundamentally different from the record of a nonaesthetic gesture. Imagine Pollock lying on the beach and leaving traces in the sand by virtue of moving his arms as he reclines. Now compare these traces of arm movements on the beach with the painted records of his arm movements in his paintings. The same physical movement may produce two different forms of index with two different significances. Whereas the mark in the sand may stand simply as evidence of a movement, the painted line made within a frame by the identical movement will be simultaneously and necessarily a symbolic gesture. Likewise, a handprint left on the beach will differ from a handprint in Pollock's *#1, 1948*, in terms of its semiotic composition. The index within the frame secures some of its significance by virtue of evoking established expectations of aesthetic activity – specifically, conventions of abstract painting. The antiaesthetic intent of Modernist gesturality can be understood only through reference to a history of painting, which types the marks as symbols. Under the sign of the aesthetic, Pollock's traces would become symbols whose interpretant was indexicality. Moreover, as soon as this method becomes a recognizable style, in which gestural marks come to resemble one another in ways that distinguish them as Pollock's, they have acquired an iconic aspect as well. Under the pressure of the frame, the indexicality of Pollock's marks is mixed with iconicity and symbolism.[5]

Such arguments provide a semiotic basis for holding that indexically intense Modernist art is not in fact any more immediate or authentic than other forms; rather it insistently signifies immediacy within Modernism's symbolic register. Another corollary to these arguments would be that metaphor and allusion are not semiotically banished by pure indexical literality. Pollock's symbols of indexical immediacy necessarily invoke all sorts of allusive interpretants. Seen in their place of fabrication on the floor of Pollock's studio, the paintings probably had a stronger literality than they could sustain once lifted to the

wall. Repositioned in aesthetic space, figures, projective spaces, and metaphorical allusions proliferate and counterbalance the autonomous physicality of the marks.

Peirce's circumspection regarding aesthetics, then – his seeing his semiotics as alienated in a fundamental way from the aesthetic – was arguably quite astute. Although he developed a disciplined visuality, he was under no delusions regarding his success where the aesthetic realm was concerned, where the density of signs resisted his earnest and valuable efforts. The development of a semiotics of art based on Peirce's categories awaits the development of some algebra for calculating the effects of signs upon one another, and specifically for gauging the refractive force of signs of the aesthetic.

Notes

1 "Fraser's *The Works of George Berkeley*," *North American Review*, October 1871; WCSP, 2, 465–6. Gothic architecture shares with scholasticism, in Peirce's account, religious devotion, complete absence of individuality, every part worked out for itself, detestation of antithesis, a gradually increasing sense of immensity, and an ultimate decline into formalism and fancifulness.

2 Peirce contrasted his *a priori* mode of working with Lady Welby's *a posteriori* method: "Your ideas of Sense, Meaning, and Signification seem to me to have been obtained through a prodigious sensitiveness of Perception that I cannot rival, while my three grades of Interpretant were worked out by reasoning from the definition of a Sign what sort of thing ought to be noticeable and then searching for its appearance" (Letter dated 14 March 1909; Hardwick, 1977, p. 111).

The process of deriving his 66 categories of signs is clearly a matter of considering all possible combinations of variables in types of signs, types of objects, and types of interpretants. The logic of formation drives this typology to an extreme of subtlety and elaboration well beyond any practical utility. Peirce claims to have tried to avoid overelaboration in his work; he threw out 100 manuscript pages because of it (Letter to Welby dated 1 December 1903; Hardwick, 1997, p. 11).

3 For clarification of this later typology, see Liszka, 1996, pp. 34ff, who discerns four different semiotic typologies in Peirce's work – he designates them original, interim, expanded, and final. Fisch distinguishes several different campaigns of work on semiotics in Peirce's writings, each governed by specific interests; see Fisch, 1986, pp. 322ff. See also Weiss and Burks (1945).

4 Peirce introduced his first graphic system, which he later termed his "Entitative Graphs," in "The logic of relatives," 1897. His Existential Graphs were presented in "Prolegomena to an apology for pragmaticism," 1906.

5 In "Materiality and the indexical fallacy," a lecture at the annual meeting of the College Art Association in 1996, Christopher Wood noted that Modernist indexes were in fact "conventional signs whose content is indexicality." He further proposed that "discourse has a powerful tendency to convert originally nonconventional gestures and traces into arbitrary signs." Wood's observations helped me clarify my own thoughts on this subject.

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Chapter 25

Conceptual Art

Charles Harrison

In recent years the category 'Conceptual Art' has been widely used as a kind of holding area to which new and apparently nontraditional kinds of art may be consigned in the absence of any adequate technical description. The term has also functioned from time to time as an apologia. Those supposedly in the know say, 'That's Conceptual Art', as their equivalents in the world of literature might once have said, 'He's a poet' – and with a similar effect on those listening. Whether for reasons of reverence or of ridicule, the designation serves to close down any expectation of sustainable discourse, rational or otherwise. To speak more sensibly of Conceptual Art, however, is to refer to a specific movement which began in the mid-1960s and was effectively exhausted by the mid-1970s.

The relationship between these two usages of the label is reminiscent of what happened to Abstract Art, the term that Conceptual Art eventually supplanted as a designation for the odd and the incomprehensible. Much that was described as Abstract Art during the third, fourth and fifth decades of the twentieth century was actually figurative in intention and in technique, however stylistically outlandish it might have appeared to those who were not professionally implicated. In fact, the more the range of the term expanded, the more remote its designation became from that barely thinkable, un-picture-like but still somehow signifying thing that had variously possessed the imaginations of Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian in the second decade of the century. If the enterprises of those artists were then to be explained, it would be increasingly necessary to recover some sense both of the strangeness of the practical problems they had once faced and of the individuality of the courses they had pursued – necessary, in other words, to restore to 'Abstract Art' its connection to the transformational conditions of a specific historical moment. This recovery and restoration would require a better-than-academic exercise – which is to say it would require imagination of *practical* conditions.

My implication, of course, is that what is understood by the term 'Conceptual Art' now stands in need of a similar work of historical restoration; that the field of view will need to be concentrated if we are to distinguish a relevant body

of work from the wider sequence of changes and tendencies to which the label has now become attached. But there is a further implication to be drawn from the comparison between the two designations. That Abstract Art served so long as a virtual term of licence for the weird or the outlandishly new is evidence of a kind that significant and continuing changes followed from the dissolution of painting's previously necessary connection to pictorial representation. If the general function in question has now been taken over by Conceptual Art, then perhaps we should look back amongst the various avant-garde enterprises of the 1960s for a disturbance of comparable and continuing moment. What we will be seeking is evidence of some problematic historical and aesthetic circumstances on the one hand, and of an imaginative and practical response to those circumstances on the other, sufficient to explain a further widespread shift in the terms under which new modern art has since been recognized and described as such.

In the wider perspective, it is clear that certain customary terms of identification for art were under some strain during the 1960s. The coherence of traditional technical categories had been threatened unevenly throughout the twentieth century, but during that particular decade these categories came under sustained assault from numerous apparent directions. If the more advanced practices of Fine Art were still largely divided into painting, sculpture, print-making and so forth through the 1970s, this was not because the originary form of these were the media to which modern artists still naturally gravitated, but rather because the categories had been allowed to extend as their margins were penetrated and explored. Elastic as these categories thus proved to be, however, an increasing amount of work was now issuing in the name of art which they simply could not be made to contain. Already by the early 1960s the problems of assessing, curating and absorbing 'other media' were troubling the liberal self-images of arts administrators, educational bureaucrats and representatives of grant-giving bodies on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1965 Don Judd opened his essay 'Specific objects' with the claim, 'Half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture', proposing 'Three-dimensional work' as a hold-all category for the art in question, and citing 'Duchamp's readymades and other Dada objects' as precedents for work 'seen at once and not part by part' (Judd, 1992, pp. 809, 812). Allan Kaprow had first given 'Happenings' a name in 1959, seven years after a notorious 'event' at Black Mountain College in which John Cage, Merce Cunningham and Robert Rauschenberg had been involved. The first Fluxus festival was staged at Wiesbaden in 1962, involving assemblages, tableaux, actions, readings, musical performmances and so forth. The designation 'Concept [as distinct from Conceptual] Art' was advanced in an essay published the following year by Henry Flynt, to refer to 'art of which the material is language' (albeit Flynt's ideas were addressed to a more literary-theatrical context than the one from which Conceptual Art would actually emerge).[1]

'Performance pieces' – intended as art *rather* than music or theatre – began to be explicitly so designated in the later 1960s. In 1968 Gerry Schum's *Land Art*

film made a strong case for television as a primary art medium, and a year later an exhibition of 'TV as a Creative Medium' was staged at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York, both anticipating artists' widespread use of video formats after equipment became readily accessible in the mid-1970s. The effect that advances in computing programmes and technologies would have on artistic work during the 1980s and 1990s was similarly anticipated in the exhibition 'Cybernetic Serendipity', staged at the ICA London in 1968 and followed two years later by 'Software' at the Jewish Museum in New York.

It should be stressed that Conceptual Art emerged not from the margins of literature or from the philosophy of language, but from a tradition of Fine Art. It was the problematic legacy of that tradition that generated its animating concerns. So long as the development of modern art was largely defined in terms of the technical categories of painting and sculpture, it had seemed easy enough to distinguish between a given work of art and a body of written or spoken discourse about it. But if a 'readymade' or a 'found object' or a 'performance' was to be singled out as a work of art, that status might not be established by its possession of appropriate formal and technical characteristics. It would then have to be secured by some claim that was inseparable from the item in question, in the form of a title, or description or specification. The 'crisis of the object' supposed to have occurred during the 1960s might more appropriately be thought of as a crisis in the critical relations between 'art' and 'language' – a crisis brought on by collapse of those protocols that had previously served to keep the two apart. As represented by Clement Greenberg in 1960, for instance, the self-critical processes of Modernist art were conducted spontaneously and subliminally; they were 'altogether a question of practice, immanent to practice and never a topic of theory' (Greenberg, 1992, p. 759). As represented by Art & Language nine years later, the making of art and the making of theory might have to be seen as indistinguishable: 'Inside the framework of "conceptual art" the making of art and the making of a certain kind of art theory are often the same procedure' ('Introduction', *Art-Language* 1(1), May, 1969). There is a buried critical implication here: that Modernist claims for the absolute priority of artistic practice might themselves turn out not to be tenable; that perhaps the critical and theoretical texts had already come to prescribe the very objects they were supposed to be supporting; that were the readable 'theory' to be subtracted from the painting or the sculpture, the remainder would be of little 'purely artistic' significance.

In 1969–70 there were several major exhibitions of new art – designed not as avant-garde initiatives but as international surveys – in which there was little work that could usefully be described as either painting or sculpture. Principal among these were 'Op Losse Schroeven', held at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 1969, 'When Attitudes become Form', held at the Kunstmuseum, Berne, and subsequently at the ICA, London, in the same year, and 'Information', held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1970. During the earliest of these exhibitions 'Conceptual Art' was merely one designation among

many tried on in reference to a broad and various international avant-garde. The present tendency to refer to virtually all not-painting and not-sculpture as 'Conceptual Art' can in part be explained by the persistence of this indiscriminate usage in the journalistic art history of the 1990s. In fact, the publication of Sol LeWitt's 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' in the summer of 1967 had already provided grounds for the identification of a specific tendency with its roots in Minimalism. 'In conceptual art,' he wrote, 'the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. . . . What the work of art looks like isn't too important' (LeWitt, 1992a, p. 834). Two years later LeWitt's more programmatic 'Sentences on Conceptual Art' were printed in the first issue of *Art-Language*, which was launched as '*The Journal of Conceptual Art*' in May 1969. Sentence 10 stated, 'Ideas alone can be works of art. . . . All ideas need not be made physical', and sentence 17, 'All ideas are art if they are concerned with art and fall within the conventions of art' (LeWitt, 1992b, p. 838). Of course, artists' statements of intention should not be mistaken for statements of fact. Yet there is no denying the power of well-timed statements to bear critically upon the ontology of art – at least as conceived in art-world discourse. It could be said that the *idea* of Conceptual Art was both a consequence of, and a means of confrontation with, a crisis of Modernism.

By 1970 a number of critics and curators – the present author among them – were staging shows specifically addressed to 'Conceptual Art' or 'Concept Art' or 'Idea Art'. Though the criteria for inclusion in these shows were neither consistent nor generally very rigorous, certain common features could be observed. There was not much colour and there was not much stuff; no expressive brushwork on the walls, no accumulations of three-dimensional form on the floors. Instead, there were diagrams and texts, the latter varying in length from a few words to many pages. There were objects, of course: books and pamphlets and pieces of paper. The typical function of these, though, was not so much to call attention to themselves as to invoke the imaginary or theoretical existence of other kinds of objects or processes or events. It was to these secondary and sometimes unstable objects of thought – concepts of one kind or another – that the spectator's attention was supposedly directed. Hence Conceptual Art.

Within the wider groupings of the avant-garde then, Conceptual Art was distinguished by the relative absence of physically robust material and by the recourse to linguistic specification and description which that absence entailed – since where objects were imaginary or merely theoretical, how was the spectator's attention to be drawn to them if not in some form of words? This approximate characterization will serve to exclude those enterprises such as interventions in the landscape, or installations or markings upon the body which, though they may not qualify as paintings or sculptures, nevertheless depend for their effects upon some first-order physical characteristics. However, it is broad enough to include at one extreme the speculative *Painting No. 11* by Atkinson and Baldwin, from the series *38 Paintings* of 1967, and at the other Robert Barry's stipulative *Something which is very near in place and time but not yet known to me* of 1969.

The first of these is a painting-sized discursive text, which opens with the question 'We need objects?' and continues in exploration of the issue. Its claim to attention resides in the critical bearing that exploration may have upon our assumptions about how it is that artistic status is earned and conferred. The second is a kind of specification for a readymade. This is to say that, for all the artist's presumed intention to frustrate the status-conferring authority of the art world, its putative elevation above the *merely* textual assumes a category of avant-garde artistic 'things' sufficiently elastic to include the as yet unknown and immaterial.

Modernist theory had tended to presume both the centrality of painting and sculpture to the development of considerable modern art, and the centrality of optical effects to any assessment of art's critical character and standing. It had also presumed that the critical virtue of visual art lay in its separability from any theoretical or interpretative texts by which it might be accompanied. It was one significant finding of Conceptual Art that very little art is unproblematically visual: that seeing and the rest of the purely optical categories do not of themselves make art possible; that to single out a 'visual' – let alone an 'optical' – aspect of art is to be left holding on to nothing much. As here characterized Conceptual Art was clearly inimical to Modernism under its dominant aspect. Indeed, Modernism was the ground against which conceptual artists generally sought to distinguish their various enterprises; or rather, since Modernism was by no means the cultural monolith it has often been taken for, we should say that that ground was defined in all cases by some specific *understanding* of Modernism. In fact, as one might expect under these circumstances, variations in the understanding of Modernism and of its legacy tended clearly to identify different theoretical positions within the Conceptual Art movement. Much could be seen to hang on three specific issues: the degree of autonomy claimed for the development of art and for aesthetic judgement; the significance accorded to Duchamp's readymades; and the reading given to the work of Judd, Morris, Stella and LeWitt in the early 1960s.

In Clement Greenberg's definitive version of Modernist theory, significant development was associated with the self-critical elimination of 'inessentials' within individual artistic media, merit was equated with a 'quality of effect' maintained in the face of that elimination, and aesthetic judgement was deemed involuntary. Duchamp was troubling to that theory, since his readymades appeared challenging both to the autonomy of established artistic media and to the priority of aesthetic effects, at least in so far as these latter were thought to require some original formal properties. The significance of the American minimal art of the early 1960s was that it represented an apparent reduction beyond any point that Greenberg's Modernism could accommodate, while proposing a new category of 'three-dimensional work' which challenged the priority of painting and sculpture. In the wake of Minimalism 'self-criticism' became widely associated with subversion of established boundaries *between* traditional artistic media.

It was generally assumed by American contributors to the Conceptual Art movement that the minimal art of the 1960s represented a categorical shift such that neither Greenberg's aesthetic protocols nor his reductivist theory were any longer applicable. This conclusion received apparent support from the criticism levelled at Minimalism by Greenberg's then follower Michael Fried. Voiced in his 1967 article 'Art and objecthood', Fried's objections to Minimalism – or, as he called it, Literalism – were that it depended for its effect upon a theatricalization of the relationship between work and spectator, and that it failed to offer that transcendence of objecthood which marked the true experience of art. In Fried's terms, this was an experience such that the spectator was transported from an ordinary present and self-consciousness into an intuition of abiding 'presentness' for which the work of art was the necessary occasion. Recalling Duchamp's derogation of the 'visual thrill' that French painting was supposed to provide, supporters of Minimalism responded that its critical aspects lay precisely in the avoidance of any claim to transcendence and in the matter-of-fact invocation of a world of ordinary things and processes and materials. Certain early forms of Conceptual Art, both in America and in Britain, may be seen as firmly rooted in that world, the significant difference – the shift into a 'Conceptual' mode of practice – lying in the terms in which the relevant processes and materials are conjured. In a typical work by Lawrence Weiner, for instance, the linguistic form of its specification is accorded equal status with any conceivable physical realization: 'Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion on receivership.'[2] Weiner's contribution to the London showing of the exhibition 'When Attitudes become Form' in 1969 consisted of the single phrase '*A river spanned*'. According to the artist's instruction this could be presented in the gallery as a mere title on an identifying label, acting as a mere prescription for a range of possible physical outcomes, or it could be realized outside the gallery in some appropriate form, so long as no illustration of this was included in the gallery display. A similar reductive materialism – or urge to 'dematerialization', to use a term current at the time – was the motor apprently driving Robert Barry's development from literally minimal paintings, to wires stretched between walls, to galleries 'occupied' by radio carrier waves, to volumes of gas released into the air, to imagined mental 'objects'.

These artists were associated with Douglas Huebler and Joseph Kosuth in an exhibition staged in New York in January 1969 by the entrepreneur Seth Siegelaub. Kosuth's 'Art after philosophy', published later that year, was intended as a manifesto for a Conceptual Art movement in which the author claimed prominence. 'All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature)', he wrote, 'because art only exists conceptually. . . . The "value" of particular artists after Duchamp can be weighed according to how much they questioned the nature of art; which is another way of saying "what they *added* to the conception of art". . . . Artists question the nature of art by presenting new propositions as to art's nature' (Kosuth, 1991, p. 18). According to this formula, Modernist engagement with

the self-critical development of specific artistic media was necessarily limiting and retrograde. Kosuth's own *Art as Idea as Idea* was offered, by a kind of extrapolation from Ad Reinhardt's *Art-as-art*, as corrective to the supposed Modernist fallacy that *works* of art may be of critical interest in virtue of properties invested in their achieved physical form. Weiner and Barry had responded to the work of Judd, Morris and LeWitt not by ignoring its specific material characteristics, but by further reducing the priority placed on any such characteristics in their own work. The implication Kosuth drew from the same work was that its status as art was secured by the intention of the originating artist. The mutually reinforcing conclusions at which he arrived were that art in its modern incarnation is a generic concept properly unrestricted by the limitations of any specific genres or media, and that the interpretation and value of any critical revision in the concept should be decided solely by reference to the intention of the artist. The problem this poses in the context of text-based work such as Kosuth's is that, unlike Duchamp's work or Reinhardt's, it leaves little space for criticism to consider whether or not expressed intentions vis-à-vis artistic status have been – or indeed can be – carried through. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that this closure is itself among the artist's intentions.

Conceptual Art developed along different lines in Britain within the practice of Art & Language, and it diverged the more clearly as that practice itself expanded from its origins in 1966–7 (notwithstanding Kosuth's formal association with the name from 1969 until his final exclusion in the mid-1970s). The difference may be expressed somewhat crudely in the following terms. However 'dematerialized' or 'unvisual' their favoured modes of publication and display, the evident conviction of the American artists was that they were engaged in the production of art. They also conceived of their 'artworks' or 'pieces' both as clearly distinguishable from any accompanying theory *and* as categorically distinct from the painting and sculpture of the Modernist tradition. This conviction was supported by recourse to precedents generally excluded from the Greenbergian canon, if not from the standard narratives of modern art history. The American Conceptual artists tended to associate stylistic integrity and consistency with avoidance of traditional technical categories.

The British artists, however, seem to have been far less confident that what they were producing was art – or they were far less interested in the issue; and they were far less sure of the grounds on which enterprises might be distributed between such categories as 'artwork', 'notes' or 'essay' – or they were far less concerned to distinguish between them. In the editorial Introduction to the first issue of the journal *Art-Language*, the suggestion was made that the essay itself might be 'held out as a "conceptual art" work'. The point of the suggestion, however, was not to claim authorship of an ontologically avant-garde artwork. It was to explore the *implications* of a circumstance in which such issues might indeed arise in practice. Before Art & Language was given a name, Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin published a number of texts which both specified problematic entities within the possible sphere of art and explored the consequences

of their being allowed artistic status (see, for instance, the booklet *Air-Show/Frameworks* of 1967). Duchamp was of less moment as a progenitor of this work than were Lewis Carroll and the philosophers of the analytical tradition. Referring back to this moment, Baldwin has written, 'An artistic practice consisting exclusively in the production of texts seemed to place a world of hitherto unimaginably complex entities within the grasp of the artist' (Baldwin, Harrison and Ramsden, 1999, p. 69). However, 'There was still some ambiguity – an ambiguity which persisted for some years – as to whether one was nominating as art what was referred to by the text, or offering the text itself as some sort of art in itself'. It was not clear – and perhaps is still not clear – whether this ambiguity was 'a central dilemma in what might be called the aesthetic ontology of Conceptual Art', or whether it was 'an aporetic complexity vital to its cultural functioning' (ibid., p. 197).

To put this last point another way, we might ask: was the substantial issue raised by Conceptual Art whether or not 'art' requires palpable things to look at; or was it whether or not some kinds of writing – which would themselves necessarily result in things to look at – could be kinds of art, *as distinct from being kinds of literature*? There may be some mutual implication between the two questions. However, while the first could be seen as entrained by the legacy of Duchamp, the second goes rather to the longer history of modern art's prising apart of the 'visual' from the 'verbal', and to the matter of its necessity or contingency.

In general the British artists were less inclined to see 'visual art' as the distinguishing characteristic of redundant technical categories, and more inclined to see the *idea* of the 'purely visual' as a mere function of what had become, under the conditions of late Modernism, a species of professional anti-intellectualism. It followed that if the relevant closures could be relaxed, the critical purport and potential of such things as paintings, sculptures, texts, installations and so on would remain matter for open inquiry. 'We were also aware that an art composed of ideas, or concepts, held intentionally would need to appear in *some* extended form, even if this was to be textual; and this text would have to have *some* coherence. A colourless green idea is not much conceptually, even if an artist thinks it is. If it *is* something substantial, then it was not the artist's *idea* of a colourless green idea' (Baldwin, 2001). From this perspective, the critical project of Conceptual Art was not to make a *new* art of 'ideas' – supposing there could indeed be such a thing – but rather to restore modern art's broken connections with the critical intellectual politics of all or any previous art and culture. This could not be tidy work. Nor, in the process of doing it, was it clear how one might distinguish between the priorities of conversation, writing, art-making or other relevant expedients. It was a considerable advantage of this position, however, that it left certain practical options open – including the option of some kind of 'return' of pictures and painting – while emancipating its adherents from Modernist reductionism and anti-intellectualism. From the point of

view of Art & Language, both Minimalism and the fashion for 'dematerialization' that followed in its wake appeared as varieties of Modernist apostasy – and thus as open to criticism of a kind applicable to work more evidently in thrall to Modernist theory. It was as though the Greenbergian logic of progressive reduction had been taken literally and to extremes, so that avant-garde artists were now vying with each other for authorship of the next most minimal entity.

We are left with two modes in which the significance of Conceptual Art might be explained. The first would emphasize the redundancy of traditional genres and media and of the aesthetic criteria extrapolated from them. It would represent the art of the later twentieth century as generic in its development, thanks to the liberating effects of the Conceptual Art movement, and to its successful assault upon the privilege accorded in Modernist theory to the visual. Freed from previous art's association with the enjoyment and accumulation of middle-sized dry goods, a 'pure' form of Conceptual Art has assumed the nonutilitarian functions of intellectual critique previously associated with philosophy, while under its more expansive aspect Conceptual Art has achieved mutation into a kind of global cultural-studies-in-practice, with licence to 'intervene' as required in 'social reality'.

The second mode of explanation would represent Conceptual Art as a contingent but realistic response to two powerful and related conditions: on the one hand, the increasingly inescapable evidence that language-use is a necessary condition for the development of any form of art; on the other hand, the apparent degeneration of Modernist theory into a set of bureaucratic protocols. These were conditions of crisis for the normal theoria of modern art as it was established by the mid-century. In face of these conditions the possibility of a defensible continuing practice seemed to require that the practised empiricist observer be dislodged from his position as arbiter of value in visual art, and that he be required to become a competent reader of texts. But since Conceptual Art was a practice of art, not of literature or of philosophy or whatever, the texts in question would have somehow to be set into or set alongside the cultural spaces occupied by art's established media; a given text might, for instance, need to be put *in place of* a painting. It was not quite clear what kind of a thing such a text might be. Given this lack of certainty and lack of precedent, Conceptual Art was necessarily ad hoc, syndicalist, dialogical and inquisitive. We might – more usually – say that it was experimental, so long as we do not dignify the term by any association with experiment as conducted in the natural sciences. The experiments of Conceptual Art put no questions to nature, nor did they seek to discover what they did not themselves create. Its questions were addressed to a culture, to its representations, and to the range of questions with which those representations were normally associated.

In setting out these alternatives I lay no claim to objectivity, nor do I seek to conceal my conviction that it is by the second of these modes of explanation that the critical potential of Conceptual Art is most usefully represented.

Notes

1 Flynt's essay on 'Concept Art', dated 1961, was published in 1963 in La Monte Young, (ed.), *An Anthology of Chance Operations . . . by George Brecht and Others*, Bronx.
2 Weiner's formula was first used in the context of the exhibition '5–31 January' staged by Seth Siegelaub in New York in 1969. It is reprinted in full in Harrison and Wood (1992), p. 882.

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Chapter 26

Barthes on Art

Margaret Iversen

When writing an overview of Roland Barthes's thought, it has become customary to divide his career down the middle and posit an early and a late Barthes. The various shifts in his position are certainly more subtle and complex than this great divide suggests, but it is none the less fair to say that Barthes's impact on the study of visual and other arts has been twofold. On the one hand, he is a structuralist semiotician of culture intent on laying bare the encoded messages and order latent in every aspect of our surroundings – including art. On the other hand, he is a countersemiotician who urges us to overcome our alienation in and servitude to the codes of language and culture through art. For early Barthes, art is one of the many repositories of cultural codes; for late Barthes, art is an activity which dissolves and breaks free from all pre-established forms.

The shifts in Barthes's views over the course of his career are hinged on an inner ambivalence. From the beginning, Barthes was aware of this ambivalence which centred on the relationship of language, and representation in general, to the world. At the end of 'Myth today' (1957), he spelt out very clearly the nature of his dilemma. He proposed that there are basically just two ways of conceptualizing the relationship of language to the world: on one hand, we can 'posit a reality which is entirely permeable to history and ideologize' or, on the other hand, we can 'posit a reality which is ultimately, impenetrable, irreducible, and, in this case, poetize', in order to seek out the 'inalienable meaning of things' (Barthes, 1957/1988, p. 158). The first assumption governs the practice of Barthes the mythologist, analyist of bourgeois ideology, Structuralist, semiologist, in short, the scientist; the second governs that of Barthes the writer. Even in his last book, *Camera Lucida*, he was still struggling with 'the uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical' (Barthes, 1980/1981, p. 8). Yet because of this internal split, he was able to weigh fairly the gains and losses associated with both sides of the opposition: 'if we penetrate the object, we liberate it but we destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but we restore it to a state which is still mystified' (Barthes, 1957/1988, p. 159.)

Barthes was such an eclectic and original thinker that searching for the sources of his ideas is not recommended. However, it is helpful for the purposes of exposition to see the division in Barthes's career as a change in the philosophical underpinning of his critical activity. Broadly, the early Barthes works within a paradigm provided by the Structuralist anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, while the later Barthes's thinking is guided by the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Before 1968, Barthes posited a thoroughly discursive world which presented him with the political task of cutting through the surface appearance to lay bare the ultimately determining structures of discourse. The individual was assumed to be subject to those structures and to experience a phenomenal world determined by them. This apparently ruled out any intuitive grasp of an extra-discursive reality. In his early work, Barthes laid the groundwork for what is now called the study of visual culture. After 1968, in the wake of a student-led near-revolution in Paris, the question of what rebels against structures had to be addressed. Could desire, the body, pre-Oedipal drives or pre-reflexive experience be considered extra-discursive? These were the concerns of the younger generation of French intellectuals who gravitated towards the journal *Tel Quel*. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) the transition is announced when he speaks, for example, of his constant battle against meanings that 'set' too quickly and 'make all thought of becoming' impossible (Barthes, 1973a/1975, p. 60).

Lévi-Strauss and the Early Barthes

The first systematic adoption of the principles of Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss founder of structural linguistics, as a model for the analysis of other cultural phenomena was carried out by Lévi-Strauss. In particular, his essay, 'The structural study of myth' (1955) started reverberations in literary studies which led to the publication in 1966 of a special issue on the French journal *Communications* which was entirely devoted to Structuralist narrative theory and was introduced by Barthes's 'Introduction to the structural analysis of narrative' (Barthes, 1966/1962, pp. 251–95). In that essay, Barthes declared that Structuralism's constant aim is 'to master the infinity of utterances (*paroles*) by describing the linguistic system (*langue*) of which they are the products and from which they are generated' (ibid., p. 252). This form of inquiry, which radically abstracts from any particular utterance or instance, would seem valueless for the study of literature or, more particularly, visual art where texture, nuance and tone are so important. And Lévi-Strauss even seemed to confirm this view himself when he noted that myth is a type of discourse at the opposite pole from poetry. While a poem is strictly untranslatable, the mythical value of myth is preserved even in the worst translations (Lévi-Strauss, 1968, p. 210). But, of course, it is precisely the way in which a Structuralist analysis of art cuts through superficial, connoisseurial considerations that made it so attractive. Like myth, the

products of visual culture could be construed as 'objectified thought'. As Lévi-Strauss noted, in order to approach this level, we must seek 'a middle way between aesthetic perception and the exercise of logical thought' (Lévi-Strauss, 1970, p. 14). Barthes's essay on the Eiffel Tower from 1964, which was originally published to accompany a book of photographs of the Tower by André Martin, not only treats it as objectified thought, but argues that the thought it embodies is Structuralist.

The Eiffel Tower is regarded by Barthes as an emblem of 'a new sensibility of vision' (Barthes, 1964a [Sontag, 1982, p. 242; Howard, 1997, p. 9]);[1] it announces the advent of 'an intellectualist mode of vision' and does so both in its bare cast-iron structure and in the panoramic view of the city which it makes possible. From both perspectives, one has the sensation of penetrating the phenomenal surface of things to witness 'an essence laid bare' (ibid. [Sontag, 1982, p. 243; Howard, 1997, p. 9]). The original shock of the tower can be partially restored by comparing it to another monumental structure, 'Liberty Enlightening the World', better known as the 'Statue of Liberty' in New York Harbour which was completed just three years earlier (1886). In fact, Gustave Eiffel designed the internal armature of the Statue which was then clad in bronze plates. The Tower was erected as part of the Exposition of 1889, which was essentially a celebration of the progress in technology, industry and commerce achieved by France since the Revolution. The Tower, which was at the time the tallest structure in the world, represented that progress, not iconographically like the Statue, but rather in its very accomplishment.

One consequence of the Tower's spareness is that its meaning is extremely labile. It is, said Barthes, the 'zero degree' of the monument, a virtually empty sign. As such, it is comparable to what Lévi-Strauss called a 'zero phoneme' or a 'floating signifier', that is, a surplus signifier in a system which is able to carry any value (ibid. [Sontag, 1989, p. 277; Howard, 1997, p. 4).[2] This gives it, according to Barthes, an oneric quality loaded with multiple meanings such as modernity, rocket, Paris, insect, surveillant Mother or Phallus. Barthes adds to these a structuralist meaning – it is for him a machine which 'permits us to transcend sensation and to see things in their structure' (ibid. [Sontag, 1982, p. 242; Howard, 1997, p. 9]). It thus makes possible a new kind of travel in which one is no longer 'thrust into the midst of sensation', but rather, from a great height, 'given the world to read and not simply to perceive' (ibid. [Sontag, 1982, p. 242; Howard, 1997, p. 9]). The phrase, 'High Structuralism', is endowed with a new and entirely appropriate resonance by this analogy.

The divergence between the appearance and the structure of the Tower offers the observer an object lesson in the inevitability of the discontinuity between the two. From a distance, the Tower is consumed as a purely vertical line. Close to, however, one observes the obliquity of the supporting pillars and lift shafts; at a more microlevel, one becomes aware of its crisscrossed network of plates and beams. This shift effects a salutary 'demystification' and affords the viewer the 'delectable contradiction of an appearance and its contrary reality' (ibid. [Sontag,

1982, p. 249; Howard, 1997, p. 16]). The effect is comparable to Lévi-Strauss's insistence on the primacy of the logical over the chronological in his study of myths: the myth may be consumed as a diachronic tale, but its underlying logic of binary oppositions is purely synchronic. For Barthes, this shift in perspective amounts to the difference between unconsciously consuming the myth and its ideology and understanding its mechanism and deep structure.

Towards the end of the original French version of the essay, Barthes applauds the Tower's ability to cut through the monumental history of Paris: 'Faced with the forest of symbols of the past, bell towers, domes, arches, the Tower rises up like a rupturing act destined to desacralize the weight of the past, to oppose to the fascination, the lure of history (as rich as it may be) the freedom of a new age' (ibid. [*La Tour Eiffel*, p. 20]). Barthes's Eiffel Tower says, 'forget'. Just as we are bid to free ourselves from our embeddedness in a body and a phenomenal world, we are also invited to cast off our history.

Two theoretical essays written just prior to 'The Eiffel Tower' inform it: they are 'The imagination of the sign' (1962) and 'The structuralist activity' (1963). In the first, Barthes elaborated the Saussurian theory that there are three basic relations that constitute the sign – the 'symbolic' relation which binds signifier to signified, the 'paradigmatic' which pertains to relations outside of discourse, and the 'syntagmatic' binding signs together in discourse. A culinary analogy will help to explain the latter two relations. The various options one is offered on an *à la carte* menu are paradigmatic sets (steak, fish, chicken, quiche); what comes served up on the plate is a syntagm that is governed by certain rules of combination (steak, chips, salad). Although each of these three relations is a necessary component of the signifying function, too often theorists have based their analyses on only one of the sign's dimensions. This is partly because there are historical shifts in the consciousness of the sign. 'Structuralism can be defined historically as the passage from a symbolic to a paradigmatic consciousness' (Barthes, 1964c/1982, p. 206). For a symbolic consciousness, there is an analogical relation between signifier and signified: to some extent 'the form resembles the content, as if it were actually produced by it (e.g. dove for peace; lion for courage)' (ibid., p. 207). The symbol is 'solitary' and carries an affective charge. The paradigmatic consciousness of the sign, in contrast, is comparative. It replaces an analogical relation with a homological one. This shift in perspective made the science of phonology possible and governed Lévi-Strauss in his new approach to totemism which rejected the traditional analogical explanation that a particular group was represented by an particular natural species because of 'an intuition of perceptible resemblances' (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, p. 46). Lévi-Strauss showed that the homological relations amongst certain natural species were structurally similar to the relations between certain social groupings.

The other relevant essay, 'The structuralist activity', is partly inspired by Roman Jakobson's celebrated article on aphasia which reinterpreted the paradigmatic and syntagmatic dimensions of the language system as two fundamental linguistic activities, selection and combination. Barthes modifies these again,

rendering them as dissection and articulation. A 'dissected' fragment, a delimited unit which has no meaning in itself, is articulated according to certain rules of combination. Because the fragments lack meaning outside their combination into an articulate expression, the 'slightest variation wrought in its configuration produces a change in the whole' (Barthes, 1963/1972, p. 216). This essay, interestingly, is written from the point of view of the Structuralist as creative artist. 'Structural man takes the real, decomposes it, then recomposes it' (ibid., p. 215). Mondrian is mentioned here and elsewhere as an exemplary artist of this sort. Barthes himself does not develop the theme, but perhaps Meyer Schapiro, the most distinguished art historian to be influenced by semiotics, was inspired to do it for him. In an article of 1978, Schapiro argues that Mondrian achieved an art of pure relations that was 'veiled in earlier art by the particularities of nature' (Schapiro, 1978, p. 242). To demonstrate his point he compares the overall organization and open relationships formed by the lines of a Mondrian composition with a painting by Degas. Both play with the way the frame intersects the lines, creating the impression that we are viewing a segment of a larger space. Barthes might also have invoked Cubism in this context, which has in recent years attracted a number of strong semiotic readings.

In both essays, the historical passage to the Structuralist, paradigmatic consciousness is, on the whole, enthusiastically welcomed by Barthes. But there are intermittent moments of doubt that will soon overturn his whole critical procedure. Particularly striking is his characterization of the paradigmatic consciousness in 'The imagination of the sign'. That consciousness, writes Barthes, sees the field of signification in perspective, spread out in a formal pattern:

> The sign is chosen from a finite organized reservoir, and this summons is the sovereign act of signification: imagination of the surveyor, the geometrician, the owner of the world who finds himself at ease on his property. (Barthes, 1964c/1982, p. 216)

Structural man, it seems, is a direct descendent of Descartes's 'master and possessor of Nature'. He is a sovereign selector of signs, all too confident in their stability and adequacy. Barthes's uneasiness about assuming such a position prompted him turn to Poststructuralist textual analysis. Influenced by the writing of Jacques Derrida (1967) and Julia Kristeva (1969), his critical procedure now attended more to the complex weave of different discourses that produce meaning in a text such as *S/Z* (1970). He also allowed more room for the creative productivity of the reading subject. However, I'm inclined to agree with Annette Lavers's view that no firm distinction can be drawn between structural and textual analysis (Lavers, 1982, p. 177).

Writing his quasi-autobiography a decade after the Eiffel Tower essay, Barthes reflected on his earlier critical practice. By 1975, he had a quite different impression of the view from the Tower. Yet even at the height of his Structuralist phase, when his focus was on the intelligibility of things, he notes that he was not immune to the pleasure of intellectual activity.

> The panorama, for example, – what one sees from the Eiffel Tower – is an object at once intellective and rapturous: it liberates the body even as it gives the illusion of "comprehending" the field of vision. (Barthes, 1975/1977, p. 103)

In other words, panoramic vision is pleasurable precisely because it brings with it an illusory sense of mastery. It encourages what Barthes now sees as part of the self-deluding image-repertoire of semiological science to which he was once in thrall. The body and its pleasures become for him the principal lever for extricating himself from that delusion. He aims to counter it with 'the texture of desire, the claims of the body' (ibid., p. 71).

Merleau-Ponty and Late Barthes

Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* is particularly helpful in focusing the issues at stake in the later half of Barthes's career. He often acknowledged his indebtedness to Merleau-Ponty, noting as early as 1964, in *The Elements of Semiology*, that Merleau-Ponty was a very early mediator of the thought of Saussure. Despite its evident unorthodoxy, Merleau-Ponty's was for Barthes the best development of the crucial distinction between language as instituted system (*langue*) and language as active speech (*parole*) that Saussure introduced in his *Course in General Linguistics*:

> He took up again the Saussurean distinction as an opposition between speaking speech (a signifying intention in a nascent state) and spoken speech (an 'acquired wealth' which does recall Saussure's 'treasure'). (Barthes, 1964b/1967, p. 24)

Barthes refers particularly to the chapter of *The Phenomenology* called 'The body as expression, and speech' in which Merleau-Ponty tried to counter the equal but opposite hazards of empiricist and intellectualist conceptions of language. The empiricist view holds that a causal link exists in our minds between certain visual stimuli and word images, thereby rendering the connection between them automatic and unproblematic. The intellectualist theory holds that first of all categories of thought are formed and then words attached as 'passive shells'. Yet neither view adequately captures the way language works. Neither can account for the way 'we move toward an articulate thought by expressing it' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 177). This original articulation of thought, in language or any other medium, is for the most part the work of the artist. For most of us, language is an institution which we inhabit. No effort of expression or comprehension is required. We live in an habitual and cliché-ridden world:

> The linguistic and intersubjective world no longer surprises us, we no longer distinguish it from the world itself, and it is within a world already spoken and speaking that we think. (ibid., p. 184)

In so far as we remain on this level, we inhabit a world that is thoroughly penetrated by language and ideology. Merleau-Ponty urges us therefore to seek out the 'primordial silence' beneath the chatter of words and 'describe the action which breaks the silence' (ibid., p. 184). It is particularly important for our purposes that he understood that action as a gesture, as a movement closely bound to the body, and further maintained that the gestural content of words was not wholly arbitrary because they contain an 'emotional essence' which makes speaking like 'singing the world' (ibid., p. 187).

It is clear from this brief account that Merleau-Ponty put a very distinctive gloss on the *langue/parole* distinction – one, parenthetically, that absorbed a great deal from Heidegger's terms *Rede* and *Gerede*, authentic speech and idle talk (Heidegger, 1973, pp. 211ff). When Barthes adopted the distinction, he gave an equally negative connotation to *langue* or spoken speech. It became not so much an acquired fortune as a set of mental manacles: *doxa* or received opinion, in his terminology. Barthes's antipathy to *doxa* remained constant throughout his life, but his strategy for combating it changed radically. I want now to examine how Merleau-Ponty's view of the relation of language to the world affected Barthes's criticism of the visual arts by turning to his essays on André Masson and the American painter, Cy Twombly.

The same year that *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) was published, Barthes wrote an interesting essay on the French Surrealist painter, André Masson, and particularly his use of Chinese ideograms. These paintings embodied for Barthes a theory of the text and of writing. Such beautiful calligraphic marks, he noted, cannot be reduced to mere communication, for they are at the same time gestures, that is, drawn lines which point back to 'the body which throbs' (Barthes, 1973b/1985, p. 154). Similarly, colour cannot be understood here as a mere ground allowing characters to 'stand out', but as pulsional energy. Chained in the Occident to reckoning, writing is here revealed as desire. Furthermore, the ideogram itself represents a quite different order from our alphabet. Chinese characters offend our logocentric sensibility which insists that writing is only a transcription of speech, an instrument, 'a chain along whose length it is the body which disappears' (ibid., p. 155). Barthes concludes that what we learn from Masson's work is that 'for writing to be manifest in its truth (and not in its instrumentality), it must be illegible' (ibid., p. 155).

It is but a short step from here to Barthes's two appreciative essays on the American painter Cy Twombly. Barthes observes that Twombly's art is tied to writing and that, like Masson's, it reveals writing as gestural. I don't know if Barthes was aware of Harold Rosenberg's celebrated essay of 1952, 'The American Action Painters', but it is nonetheless tempting to read Barthes's characterization of Twombly's gestural art as a sly riposte. Rosenberg's essays crackles with the rhetoric of sub-existentialist machismo: the canvas is 'an arena in which to act' and painting is a lonely, heroic endeavour liberated from all cultural value. We are told that 'the American vanguard painter took to the white expanse of the canvas as Melville's Ishmael took to the sea' (Rosenberg, 1952/1960, p. 31).

In striking contrast, Barthes describes Twombly's gesture as negligent, indolent, erotic. He observes that while an action seeks a result or an end, the gesture is the surplus of an action, its surrounding atmosphere (Barthes, 1979/1985, p. 160). The gesture is made, as it were, 'for nothing'. 'Is it not at this extreme limit', enquires Barthes, 'that "art" really begins?' (ibid., p. 161).[3] The references in these passages to excess and expenditure revive terms used in an earlier piece called 'The third meaning' (1970a) in which Barthes sought 'obtuse', unobvious, meanings in stills from Eisenstein's films. In both essays, the work of the dissident Surrealist, Georges Bataille, is evoked (Barthes, 1970a/1982, pp. 317–33).

In 'The third meaning' and the Masson and Twombly essays, it is immediate intelligibility which is considered an impediment to seeing features or marks as figures in themselves. Studying a technical drawing of some kind one ignores both the performance of the gesture and the materiality of the signs. Twombly's marks, by contrast, play with the materiality of sign in a way that evokes the unique body of the artist. For Barthes, Twombly makes the gesture visible with an apparently indolent cursive script that leaves a trace of its passage through time. There is something rather paradoxical, and perhaps intentionally pointed, about Barthes taking up writing as a confirmation of singularity or uniqueness, since writing is to such a large extent social and impersonal. His attention to writerly artists is, of course, a device for shifting our understanding of all writing and language in general. Barthes wants us to rediscover language from the point of view of emergent, 'speaking' speech, rather than as 'spoken', instituted language. He reformulates Merleau-Ponty's distinction for his own purposes, introducing the terms 'producing' and 'product'. The product, he continues, 'enters the imaginary, what is real is producing'. The viewer of Twombly's work must, says Barthes, 'retrospectively see a movement, what was the hand's becoming' (Barthes, 1979/1985, p. 172). In a typical Barthesian hyperbole, he declares that 'at each stroke, Twombly blows up the museum' (ibid., p. 172). By 'the museum', Barthes refers to a place that preserves objects that were once inaugural, creative gestures, but have since become common currency, part of the repertoire of art and so dead letters. Barthes refers in this context to the theories of the British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott who drew attention to the great difference between the regulated game and play. In order to further emphasize the open-ended process of play, Winnicott used the verbal form 'playing' (Winnicott, 1972).

It would seem that nothing could be more resistant to the paralysis of codification than the gestural text. But it too, laments Barthes, 'repeats itself, counterfeits itself in lustreless texts' and degenerates into 'prattle'. 'Where to go next?', he wonders in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (Barthes, 1975/1977, p. 71). He began by focusing on the sign itself and its relations, and then turned his attention to the desiring subject of speech, writing or art practice. There was really only one remaining term to consider, the referent, and this is what Barthes explored in his last book *Camera Lucida*. If the gesture leads back to the body of the artist, the photograph, for Barthes, points insistently to the object or person

that once posed before the camera – a person long dead, an absent friend, in short, a lost object. Because the light which produced the photograph actually touched the person or thing photographed, Barthes suggests that 'a sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze' (Barthes, 1980/1981, p. 8).[4] Nothing could be further from the assertion, characteristic of early Barthes, that 'the photograph is verbalized in the very moment it is perceived' (Barthes, 1961/1982, p. 207).[5] No doubt the death of Barthes's mother was the event that prompted the writing of his book on photography, but it did so in a context of a dizzying proliferation of mass-produced simulacra. The themes of *Camera Lucida*, the mother, memory, death and the irruption of the Real, are salutary antidotes to our postmodern condition.

To lay bare the structure of the sign, to reinvent the sign, to follow it back to its referent – these are very different critical strategies, but in the end they are all ways in which Barthes attempted in his writing to liberate us from the dead weight of doxa.

Notes

1 The English translation of this text is readily accessible in two anthologies, but it represents only half of the original French version. I will refer to both versions where possible.
2 For the 'floating signifier' see Claude Lévi-Strauss (1987) *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, trans. by Felicity Baker, Routledge and Kegen Paul, p. 62.
3 See also 'The wisdom of art' in Barthes, 1973b/1985.
4 I have written on the Lacanian aspects of this book in Iversen, 'What is a photograph?', *Psychoanalysis in Art History*, a special issue of *Art History*, 17(3), 1994, pp. 450–63.
5 An exhibition was staged in Paris which juxtaposed Barthes's writing on art with the works: *Roland Barthes: le texte et l'image*, Paris: Pavillon des arts, 1986.

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The first date given in these references is the date of original publication; the second date given is the date that the edition/translation referred to was published.

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Chapter 27

Foucault and Art

Roy Boyne

In common with other '*maître penseurs*' of the twentieth century, such as Heidegger (on Van Gogh), Lyotard (on Newman) and Derrida (*The Truth in Painting*), Foucault wrote a small amount on art. His most notable art writings are on Velasquez's painting *Las Meninas*, and on the work of Magritte. He also used art works to illustrate the epochal shifts which were the subject of his thinking in the 1960s, and we find this particularly in his work on madness: *L'histoire de la folie a l'âge classique*, in which he uses works by Dürer, Bosch, Bouts and Brueghel the Elder to illustrate his thesis that in the sixteenth century madness was a part of reason, subsequently in that text using the work of Goya as a contrast. Foucault's influence, however, on the field of art goes well beyond his writing on particular artists and art works. His writings on the questions of the body, power and subjectivity have not only been a major addition to the volume of theoretical resources available to art practitioners and interpreters alike, they have also contributed to the reconfiguration of the cultural landscape of the 'West' in the late twentieth century.

Velasquez's *Las Meninas*

Foucault's *The Order of Things*, first published in 1970, was a bold attempt to demonstrate that the structure of European thought and understanding has changed twice over the last four hundred years, once around 1600, and then again 200 years later, at the opening of the modern era. He argued that the key to forms of understanding was to be found in the idea of resemblance, which he described in terms of sympathy and antipathy. Knowledge of the world here was attained through recognizing and interrelating the signature characteristics of its constituent parts: 'To search for a meaning is to bring to light a resemblance' (Foucault, 1970, p. 29). In Foucault's understanding of post-medieval European culture, the world is 'one vast single text' (ibid., p. 34), and the labour of understanding and demonstration takes the form of commentary: 'scriptural

commentary, commentaries on Ancient authors, commentaries on the accounts of travellers, commentaries on legends and fables' (ibid., p. 40). Works of nature and of culture are alike in announcing their properties and qualities: 'there is no difference between the visible marks that God has stamped upon the surface of the earth, so that we may know its inner secrets, and the legible words that the Scriptures, or the sages of Antiquity, have set down in the books preserved for us by tradition' (ibid., p. 33).

Foucault does not make explicit what this would mean for the understanding of the work of the Renaissance artists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but the implication is clear: van Eyck, Donatello, Dürer and others were working on the elaboration of the great Chain of Being stretching back to ancient texts and classical civilization. Whatever innovations they introduced helped further to decipher the single unified universe implied, for example, in Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*. In Foucault's conception, however, the Renaissance order is destined to be superseded. To paraphrase his commentary on Cervantes, art will cease to be 'the prose of the world'. The depiction of resemblances will come to hide as much as it reveals; identities will no longer be secure; subjects and objects will be set apart and classified. The reign of resemblance inherited from time immemorial will be replaced by the rule of difference, governed not by the original order of things, but by interests and analysis from within the present era. For Foucault, it is in this new context that Velasquez is found.

Painted in 1656, *Las Meninas* is the sole subject of the first chapter of *The Order of Things*. What does Foucault say about this painting in which Velasquez himself is painting in the company of the Spanish court of Philip IV? He picks out three themes in particular: the gaze of the self-portrayed painter, the gaze of the viewer, and the background mirrored representation of Philip IV and his wife Queen Maria Ana.

The painter is staring out from the painting. He is looking at a point outside of the canvas. He appears to be looking at us, but this is only because 'we happen to occupy the same position as his subject' (ibid., p. 4). Because its back is toward us, we cannot see the canvas on which the painter is painting; thus we do not know who is in our position. '[T]he spectator and the model', says Foucault, 'reverse their roles to infinity' (ibid., p. 5). This is the third of a series of doubling movements to which Foucault will draw our attention. First we see two canvases, one *in* the painting and one which *is* the painting. Second we encounter two painters, Velasquez the painter in the painting and Velasquez the painter of the painting. Now, thirdly, we find that spectator and model, the observer and observed, become implicated in each other's identity. Here we have no clear context of resemblance between what is inside the painting and what is outside it. Both inside and outside, 'we do not know who we are or what we are doing' (ibid., p. 5). Because of 'the inaccessible surface of the canvas within the picture', the painter appears to have knowledge of us, while we know nothing of what he is doing.

But surely this is not right. A reflection can be seen in a mirror at the back of the room. It depicts the King and Queen. Are they not the models being painted? Why does this reflection not dissolve the giddying doubles identified by Foucault? Why does it not re-establish a clear separation between spectator and model, allowing both spectator and model to be secure in their own identities, playing their parts in the single world drama? Foucault's answer is that the *naming* of the King and Queen, and their *identification* as the models for an unseen painting in progress (challenged, in any event, by narrative interpretations such as that of Jonathan Brown who speculates that the King and Queen had just entered the room to observe the work going on there; see Brown, cited in Snyder and Cohen, 1980, pp. 432–3), are insufficient to keep us within the unified framework of the Renaissance world-view.

The bearing of the Infanta and the surrounding courtiers betrays no recognition of the epochal movement taking place in their time. As an anonymous correspondent expressed it in a letter to Philip IV in 1621: 'no republic suffers greater misfortune than ours because we live with neither suspicion nor fear of catastrophe, trusting in a lackadaisical confidence' (Maravall, 1986, p. 22), and Foucault finds further support, in the scene itself, for the view that it would be an instance of 'lackadaisical confidence' to subordinate the interpretation of the painting to the named figures in the mirror. They are 'pale' and 'minuscule' compared to the other figures in the work; they are shown in reflected light; they are weak presences compared to the figure in the doorway adjacent to them. Although Foucault does not point this out, this figure is also named Velasquez (Keeper of the Queen's tapestries – see Searle, 1980, p. 489), providing a further frisson of support for Foucault's view that naming no longer even gets close to the roots of identity in the classical age. We can also add that if their full and clear representation is to be on the canvas whose front we cannot see, that canvas is destined to be placed high on a wall, lost in the dark among countless others; and further that the vanishing point of the picture is not within the mirror, but within the adjacent doorway (Snyder and Cohen, 1980, p. 435).

There is not a complete answer to the question of what this painting represents. Even the Infanta, the figure at the very centre, looks out, as the mirror looks out, and Velasquez looks out, towards a fundamental absence. *Las Meninas* is a representation whose foundational figure cannot be found, whose original model and external creator are highly ambiguous (for another, supporting, view of this ambiguity see Alpers, 1983a, 1983b). Foucault finds evidence in this painting of the emerging realization of the irreducibility of representation to its originating moment. The absence of clear lines from origin to representation is going to be, for Foucault, a defining feature of the Classical age. The values of the Classical age will become entirely determined within the elements of the representations themselves. The order of representation will not just affect, but will function triumphantly as, the order of the world, and the deep resonance and secret of this painting is that this bedrock order of representations, impossible

to render adequately in the mode of reference since, symptomatically, the painter and the object of the painting can never be depicted together, is precisely what this painting shows and helps to bring about.

The second part of *The Order of Things* asks 'What are the limits of representation?' In brief, the move which Foucault describes is from the tabulation of representations to the analysis of their underlying determinations. The romance of self-sufficient representation is the starting point. Collection and classification begins as an imperative to read the apparent logic of the world. Foucault discusses how seventeenth-century understandings of language, natural history and the analysis of wealth begin to emerge. Just as with his analysis of *Las Meninas*, however, there is instability and incompleteness at the core of the emerging disciplines of general grammar, natural history and mercantilism. The assumption that it is possible to read off the simple, single order of the world will be parodied: openly in the case of Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet* or the autodidact in Sartre's *Nausea*. The childish faith in the idea of the museum, found in Flaubert, and the earnest confidence in the order and completeness of the dictionary attested to by Sartre's autodidact, are no longer credible. Many different orders are possible, as Foucault indicates by his citing of Borges's Chinese encyclopedia, in the first paragraph of the preface to *The Order of Things*. This division of animals into fourteen categories, beginning with 'belonging to the Emperor' and ending with 'that from a long way off look like flies', finds its entire meaning, not as a reflection of the world, but in the context and order of the tabulation itself. A general recognition of the infinity of possible arrangements of empirical phenomena leads from the classification of empirical phenomena to the theorization of their underlying structures:

> To classify, therefore, will no longer mean to refer the visible back to itself . . . it will mean, in a movement that makes analysis pivot on its axis, to relate the visible to the invisible, to its deeper cause, as it were, then to rise upwards once more from that hidden architecture towards the more obvious signs displayed on the surfaces of bodies. (Foucault, 1970, p. 229)

This new epoch, in which Foucault thought we are still located, is dominated by the drive to penetrate appearances. However, his understanding of the modern era does not rest upon the success story of science and technology. Rather he will focus on the human sciences, on their weaknesses, failures, obsessions and plasticity. This path is, for him, inescapable, since the modern era is the epoch of 'Man'. By this, he does mean the figure of humanist discourse stretched back to the ancients. Nor is his final resting point that prime figure of humanistic self-production, the 'author'. What he really wants to show is that 'Man' as we generally understand the idea is a relatively recent creation, and is almost certain to be erased in the next epistemic eruption; whatever form it eventually takes.

In Foucault's *L'histoire de la folie a l'âge classique*, especially in his brief treatment of Goya, the modern desire to penetrate surfaces even extends to the

appearances of reason and rationality. However, Foucault's book on Magritte is his only developed analysis of art which emerges as part of the modern project of questioning representation without necessarily aspiring to return to the moment(s) of origination.

Magritte: *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*

Foucault's short text, *This is Not a Pipe*, was published in 1968, two years after an exchange of letters initiated by Magritte following his reading of *The Order of Things*, and one year after his death. Foucault's discussion of Magritte's image of a pipe underneath which is written *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* refers to two versions of the painting. The first version, painted, Foucault thinks, in 1926 (although Whitfield dates the original picture to 1929), has just two elements, the image of a pipe and the French phrase beneath. The second version, dated some forty years later, is of a painting within a painting. The pipe image and its underlying rubric is placed on an easel in a bare room, and above and to the right of the picture on the easel hovers a much larger image of a pipe. The second picture is entitled *The Two Mysteries*. Foucault does not make reference to a third pipe picture, painted in 1935, in which the wording is rendered in English, and whose title was *The Treason of Images*. These are not the only pipe images that Magritte did.

Foucault's first demonstration is that there is more going on here than the simple lesson that the image of an object is not the object itself. Following the theme, introduced in the *Las Meninas* essay, that there is no easy connection between the orders of language and image, he asks what can be learnt about the first picture by considering the tradition of the calligram. The example he takes is Apollinaire's *Fumées*. This is a poem which is partly constructed so that the words *et je fume du tabac du zone* are arranged on the page in the shape of a pipe. Here the words and the image repeat each other; they show and tell in the same operation. Does Magritte's image do this? Does it show and tell at the same time? Foucault points out that as we read the calligram, and are semantically and syntactically consumed, the shape dissipates: 'the very thing that is both seen and read is hushed in the vision, hidden in the reading' (Foucault, 1982, p. 25). If word and image are essentially kept apart in the calligram, what does this mean for Magritte's image? For Foucault, these separated orders of language and representation lead to three modes of reading Magritte's painting. First, the image of the pipe in the picture is not a pipe. Second, the language in the picture is not the same as the picture which is (not) a pipe. Third, the ensemble of image and language in the picture is not a pipe. As he puts it, 'Nowhere is there a pipe' (ibid., p. 29). At this point, Foucault takes us to the second picture and introduces a teacher at the side of the easel holding Magritte's picture. He is explaining to the class the three ways in which this is not a pipe:

> Negations multiply themselves, the voice is confused and choked. The baffled master lowers his extended pointer, turns his back to the board, regards the uproarious students, and does not realize that they laugh so loudly because above the blackboard and his stammered denials, a vapor has just risen, little by little taking shape and now creating, precisely and without doubt, a pipe. 'A pipe, a pipe,' cry the students stamping away while the teacher, his voice sinking ever lower, murmurs always with the same obstinacy though no one is listening, 'And yet it is not a pipe.' (ibid., p. 30)

Magritte, who thought of himself as a philosopher as much as a painter, fits perfectly into the framework of Foucault's concerns. He wrote, in his first letter to Foucault, of the importance of 'the mystery evoked *in fact* of the visible and the invisible' (ibid., p. 57), echoing Foucault's archaeological concern with the epistemic rupture occurring around 1800 which led to the subordination of surface characteristics to questions of underlying structure. Magritte's painting could not dissolve the gap between word and image, and in that sense it was epochally symptomatic rather than revolutionary. However, it did invite theoretical reflection on the underlying relations and divisions between word, image and object. Here Foucault saw a clear link with Kandinsky's concept of colours as 'things', 'neither more nor less objects than the church [or] the bridge' (Foucault, 1982, p. 35), but he did not develop it. He preferred to finish his short essay on Magritte by pointing to Andy Warhol, an artist, like Magritte, whose themes included the relations between word, image and object. He draws no conclusions, but rhetorically ends his text on Magritte, saying 'Campbell, Campbell, Campbell, Campbell' (ibid., p. 54).

Body, Power, Subjectivity

As Foucault turns into the 1970s, his work changes. It remains ambitious and multifaceted, but it begins to turn away from the problematic of objects and their representations towards questions about the history of the human subject. His overall concern remains that of the underlying forces structuring the world in which we live, but his angle of approach now runs from the question of the body to that of the formation of the self.

Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* treats the body as a critical locus of social control. From the eighteenth century forward, discipline is no longer exercised through beatings, torture and death. No longer spectacular, discipline becomes measured and continuous. However, it is nevertheless still corporeal. Through a relentless process of correction, new behavioural standards were imposed relating to punctuality and the precise self-regulation of time, to new levels of concentration and norms of earnestness, to forms of dress and personal hygiene, and to codes of interpersonal conduct of all kinds. This formation of 'docile bodies' was assisted by corrective mechanisms which exposed nonconformists to a panoply of effects from slight humiliations to corrective imprisonment. Even

the smallest departure was noticed and acted upon; 'each subject found himself caught in a punishing universality' (Foucault, 1979, p. 178). The outcome of the process was the cloning of the subject population, the *normalization* of the individual. We have entered the age of the norm, and left behind the arbitrary power of the king. The overpowering visibility of the monarch is now replaced by the permanent visibility of the subject. Individualization, formerly ascending, is now descending; and as a necessary logical concomitant of the sovereign's disappearance, power becomes anonymous. No longer invested in the king, it can only now be everywhere, '*that moment when the sciences of man became possible is the moment when a new technology of power and a new political anatomy of the body were implemented*' (ibid., p. 193, italics in original). Power is less repressive than productive, '*The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production*' (ibid., p. 194, italics in original).

Craig Owens pointed out the signal importance of this conception for the work of Barbara Kruger. The subordination of the subject to social stereotypes 'promotes passivity, receptivity, inactivity – docile bodies' (Owens, 1992, p. 194). Discussing Kruger's 1983 work, *Untitled (You Are Not Yourself)*, which depicts fractured women's faces in a broken mirror on which are pasted the words, composed from emboldened letters cut from a newspaper, **'You are not yourself'**, Owens writes:

> Immobility is a pervasive theme in Kruger's work: a female silhouette, literally pinned down, may appear with the injunction 'We have received orders not to move'; or a patient may be held in place by a battery of dental appliances while the viewer is admonished, 'You are a captive audience'; or the words 'Your gaze hits the side of my face' may appear beside a female portrait head. (ibid., p. 195)

It is not, of course, necessary to think that Foucault was a necessary stimulus either for Kruger's work or for Owens's interpretation, but what is clear is that Foucault's conception of modernity's 'docile bodies' allows us to understand something of the politics of resistance in art in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Especially in areas such as 'body art', 'performance art' and 'abject art', and in the art inspired by social movements and the politics of identity, the rejection of the twinned reality of docility and stereotype, described by Foucault, can be plainly apprehended.

Foucault's understanding of power was not, however, restricted to his insight that power and resistance are inseparable. In fact, Foucault's main contribution to our understanding of power may well have been to show that it is positive as well as negative, that it is affirmative and productive as well as destructive and forbidding. Foucault explores the notion of positive power particularly in his writings on sexuality, the founding idea of which is that there is a basic relationship between sexuality and power. If power is seen as predominantly forbidding (making laws which must not be broken) and demanding (requesting tribute which must be paid), then the power–sex relation presents itself in terms

of repression. What Foucault describes as the 'repressive hypothesis' is persuasive; it is that sexuality was repressed at around the same time as the development of capitalism. This repression, so the argument might go, may be explained as an outcome of the 'Protestant ethic', or as a requirement that, within capitalism, human energies must be made productive, not spent in pleasurable sensual activity. In fact, Foucault finds little to support the repressive hypothesis with its inherent economic logic, but he does find that since the seventeenth century there has been a tremendous expansion of sexual discourses: demographic, biological, medical, psychiatric, psychological, ethical, political. From the end of the eighteenth century, new categories of person were elaborated within the discourses of sex. Homosexual, fetishist, voyeur and so on, were now terms that classified people, no longer simple descriptions of activities. Western societies became saturated with sexuality. The nineteenth-century family was, Foucault argues, experienced as a sexual minefield in which constant vigilance was necessary. Although conceptualizing power and sexuality in terms of repression cannot be adequate in the face of these developments, it is also necessary to understand that the emergence of these new categories is, at least within Foucault's conception, nevertheless a matter of control. To take just one example, Thaïs Morgan, reflecting on nineteenth-century representations of male bodies, notes that, 'Homophobia was (is) built into the continuum of close male–male relations itself as a safeguard against same-sex couples ever effectively challenging the hegemony of heterosexuality' (Morgan, 1996, p. 72). This example recognizes the transformation of emergent categories, such as that of the 'homosexual', into key nodes in new networks of social power, and shows that the processes of institutional power are not just negative and repressive. Beyond this social creativity, however, the example also shows that processes of repression and negation do not lose their significance just because they are no longer to be seen as the only essential mechanisms of social and institutional power.

One institutional emergence that has had a considerable impact upon the world of art is the museum. In 1967, Foucault completed a manuscript, which was subsequently destroyed, on Manet (Jay, 1993, p. 385). He claimed that Manet was the first artist to produce work whose primary context was not the history of art, but the museum:

> *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* and *Olympia* were perhaps the first 'museum' paintings, the first paintings in European art that were less a response to the achievement of Giorgione, Raphael and Velasquez than an acknowledgement . . . of the new and substantial relationship of painting to itself, as a manifestation of the existence of museums and the particular reality and interdependence that paintings acquire in museums. (Foucault, 1977b, p. 92)

As far as we know, Foucault did not formally consider the relevance of the founding of the major national museums in Europe between the French Revolution and the defeat of Napoleon (Duncan, 1995, p. 37) for his thesis concerning the

break from the classical age at the end of the eighteenth century. However, if Karl Philipp Moritz's statement from the late eighteenth century, that the beauty of art leads us to 'sacrifice our narrow, individual existence to a higher mode of being' (cited in Burger and Burger, 1992, p. 79), is at all near the mark, then the museum as a site for distraction from troubled lives is entirely consonant with Foucault's conception of the production and maintenance of docile bodies. Such soft repression has generally led to equally soft resistance, the determination of artists to work outside of established institutions and procedures, for example. However, a rare example of an artist who is explicitly critical of the relationship between the museum and naked social power is Hans Haacke, who through his installations not only demonstrates that the American tobacco giant Philip Morris is funding museum exhibitions at the same time as giving people cancer, that Mobil Oil sponsored the Metropolitan Museum of Art while simultaneously fuelling the South African security forces during the regime of apartheid (Luke, 1992, p. 163), but also signals the possibility of countereducation, of resistance to hegemonic agendas and of rejecting socialization into docility.

Haacke's targeting of distorted communication recognizes, as did Foucault's work on prison reform, that other models of subjectivity and subjectification may be possible. This was the animating spirit of Foucault's last works on the formation of the Greek and Christian self, to supplement our understanding of the powerful mechanisms of subjectification that surround us with a historically founded account of different processes of self-formation. He explained:

> all moral action involves a relation with the reality in which it is carried out, and a relationship with the self. . . . A history of 'Codes' would analyse the different systems of rules and values that are operative in a given society . . . the agencies . . . that enforce them . . . [while] a history of the way in which individuals are urged to constitute themselves as subjects of moral conduct would be concerned with the models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination . . . [i.e.] a history of the forms of moral subjectivation and of the practices of the self that are meant to ensure it. (Foucault, 1986, pp. 28–9)

He thought these codes of behaviour and forms of self-subjectification could develop with relative independence at times. Sometimes the emphasis will be on the former, and this will turn our attention to the agencies of authority; sometimes the emphasis will be on the latter, on forms of self-discipline, for example, rather than on obedience to law.

To understand this distinction between the rulings of the authorities and modes of self-discipline, Foucault takes us back to the ancient Greeks, and considers passion and excess. The Greeks had a notion of the *aphrodisia*, 'the acts, gestures and contacts that produce a certain form of pleasure' (ibid., p. 40). Christianity sought to break the link between pleasure and desire, and this made for a decisive rupture with the Greek experience, the precise quality of which was not that anything could be possible, but had to do with *intensity*. The

division is between lesser and greater: moderation or excess (ibid., p. 44). For Aristotle, offences are quantitative in nature: capitalism, for example, would have been an offence because it is based on permanent and intense striving for profit. Here we have Foucault's first difference between the Greeks and ourselves: for the Greeks the danger was obsession, their moral universe was quantitative, their mode of self-discipline based on a principle of moderation. A little erotic indulgence, in the right place even a single murder, and certainly some slight covetousness: such eventualities, Foucault implies, would not necessarily have provoked moral outrage. We are not dealing here with modes of self-control based on obedience to rules, but rather based on a positioning along a continuum. This is the logic of the trial of Socrates, who was punished for the immoderation of his insistent pedagogy. The goal of reason, of moral reflection, was to work out the conditions and modalities of a 'use'; that is, to define a style for what the Greeks called *chresis aphrodision*, the use of pleasures. The Greeks knew that waiting and restraint increase ultimate satisfaction, linking moderation directly to pleasure. Thus morality 'is also an art of the right time' (ibid., p. 58). It was also a matter of status. The more authority one had, the more one was in the public eye, the more is it demanded that one's standards of conduct be rigorous and self-disciplined. There is a difference between the elite and the mass. Of course, we see echoes of this in our expectation that judges, for instance, should set an example, and that children have yet to learn how to discipline themselves. Although there was a very significant body of law, then, there was something else. It inhabited what Habermas would call the lifeworld. It was a practice, a know-how that guided actors by disciplining their needs, understanding their personal time, and recognizing their wider responsibilities. The three differences which Foucault finds between the Greek and Christian modes of self-surveillance amount to a demonstration of the possibility of flexible but disciplined subjectivation. Christianity rejected that flexibility, demanding 'precise forms of attention, concern, decipherment, verbalisation, confession, self-accusation, struggle against temptation, renunciation, spiritual combat, and so on' (ibid., p. 63). The Greek attitude is summed up by the term *enkrateia*, an active form of self-mastery, self-overcoming, for the forces against which one struggles are part of oneself. *Enkrateia* is closely linked to moderation, for the latter is achieved by exercising mastery over oneself, but the Greek view that the forces to be struggled against are immanent contrasts with the strong Christian tradition that these forces are alien and sinful. Self-mastery for the Greeks is replaced by extirpation and purification for the Christians.

The question here is not whether Foucault's work on the Greek and Christian concepts of the self was accurate, but whether he succeeds in demonstrating that alternative constructions of the subject are possible. Rainer Rochlitz notes that 'Foucault does not hesitate to put forward the Greek model for the consideration of the "liberation movements" of the Western world in the 1980s' (Rochlitz, 1992, p. 251). His pointers towards the possibility of alternative constructions of the self have also helped to form the atmosphere within which the

contemporary Western art of the last quarter of the twentieth century has been produced.

In Conclusion

Foucault's writing on art is both interesting and symptomatic of some of his wider concerns. It is, however, his innovative and controversial histories of the body, of sexuality, of the self and, overarching all of this, his approach to the understanding of power, that probably hold most significance for the field of art. Foucault's demonstration that alternative modalities of the self are possible has contributed to the development of the recent artistic counterdiscourses of the avant-garde. His historicization of the body, as a site of both positive and negative power, has fed into the development of performance art. The work from the 1960s on the relationship between language, image and object is available as a resource for Conceptual Art. His insight that power might be creative as well as repressive, has added impetus to artistic search for innovation, and more importantly for validity. As Krzysztof Wodiczko, a public artist whose work consists in the projection of images on public buildings, put it, citing from Foucault's interview, 'Truth and power':

> It's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time. (Wodiczko, 1992, p. 1094)

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Chapter 28

Derrida and the Parergon

Robin Marriner

Introduction

In comparison with many other contemporary French theorists Derrida's work has received relatively little attention within the writings of the international art world in the last twenty or so years. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, for example, Althusser's thinking on ideology was drawn upon to both formulate and justify certain areas of artistic practice (Althusser, 1971; Tickner, 1984), by the mid-1980s Baudrillard's writings, and in particular his notions of 'simulacra', 'hyper-reality' and the 'loss of the real', provided the reference points through which much contemporary art practice was read and elaborated in numerous articles in the centrally important journals and catalogues.[1] Towards the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, with an emphasis on 'body art', Kristeva and Lacan gain a greater degree of prominence (Owens, 1984; Whitney Museum, 1993; Krauss, 1993). Throughout this period Barthes's writing features as a background source, and one finds occasional reference to Foucault, though almost exclusively to the notions of surveillance from the chapter on the Panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977; Owens, 1984; and, particularly, Halley, 1988). References to Derrida are much rarer, e.g. Owens and Gilbert-Rolfe (Owens, 1979; Gilbert-Rolfe, 1989), and for the most part to be found in journals that, though concerned with art, are somewhat peripheral to the making of contemporary art culture (Orton, 1989; Tagg, 1992).

In part the reason for the paucity of references is perhaps to be found in Derrida's own writing. In comparison with Baudrillard for example, he does not offer a systematic explanatory vision of the nature of contemporary reality, rather he interrogates the logical structures with which we presently think, and claims to disclose that those structures and their logic are other than we have thought, that their foundations are not grounded in the way that we have assumed. His project could be said to be essentially critical and epistemological; its emphasis is to scrutinize and interrogate the tenability of other philosophers' accounts of

the relations between language, thought and the world. Such a project evidently has implications for how those relations should be reconceived, not least in respect of an understanding of how meaning can obtain, but not with the specificity of description Baudrillard offers.

In part the infrequent engagement with Derrida's writing is also perhaps explicable by reference to the practices of the art world itself, and more particularly by reference to its relationship to and use of theory. At the risk of generalizing, one might say that the predominant use of theory in the art world has been less with a concern for epistemology, less a concern with examining the conditions of meaning, than with asserting meaning, with interpretation. Bodies of ideas, or at least selected elements from bodies of ideas, are drawn upon in order to articulate the meaning of particular works, and to direct and conceptualize practice. For example the extensive use of Baudrillard's concepts has included application to the photographs of Richard Prince and the sculpture of Haim Steinbach, in the former case to claim that that the work is commenting on the ubiquity of images to be found in our culture 'behind' which there is no 'real', or in the latter case to signal that all signs within our culture, including those of the aesthetic realm, have become permeated by and subject to the commodity exchange system (for Prince see Linker, 1982; for Steinbach, see Foster 1989). Typically, art writing's practice is the presentation of the meaning of the work under consideration through the work's juxtaposition with some theory of which it is taken to be a confirming or embodying instant.

Implicit in such practice are assumptions: that there is an object, the work, bounded, with certain salient features in place, to which the theory is brought; an object whose meaning requires elucidation anterior to the bringing of the theory which assists in discerning that meaning. Rarely within art writing are the claims or implications of the theory that are being brought to the art object turned back on or considered in relation to the practice of the art writing itself: for example, the consequence of drawing upon and putting into play theory which (has amongst its) claims that the meaning of signs is much less determined and fixed than we have hitherto thought, for a practice that is purporting to present *the* meaning of a work. Given that, it is perhaps not totally surprising that reference to certain territories of theoretical writing has been eschewed, including that wherein questions of the relations between 'objects' and 'discourse' are directly addressed – and here one would be thinking as much about Foucault's more 'epistemological' writing as that of Derrida's (Foucault, 1976, 2, chapters 2 and 3). For in those writings not only does one find an absence of some encompassing vision that can be readily drawn upon for interpretative use, but one also finds ideas that problematize those very relations between 'objects' and 'discourse' on which the present practice of art writing depends, or so I shall argue.

Not only am I suggesting that the significance of Derrida's work for art culture has been undervalued by that culture, I am claiming that his writing has fundamental implications for our understanding of the nature of an art object and its condition of meaning: of how it means, its boundaries, of what is *internal* to it

and what *external*. I also want to suggest that his ideas have fundamental implications both for our conception and practice of art criticism. In elaborating these claims I shall also show how Derrida's work provides a means of understanding certain changes that have taken place in recent art practice and the debates around them: those that are characteristically discussed in terms of a distinction between the Modern and the Postmodern.

Parergon

> *parergon*: neither work (*ergon*) nor outside the work [*hors d'oeuvre*], neither inside or outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it *gives rise* to the work. (Derrida, 1987, p. 9)

During his discussion of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* in the essay 'Parergon' in the work *The Truth in Painting* there is a passage where Derrida writes of how when we look at a painting we take the frame to be part of the wall, yet when we look at the wall the frame is taken to be part of the painting: '. . . the parergonal frame stands out against two grounds, but with respect to each of these two grounds, it merges into the other' (Derrida, 1987, p. 61). The frame of the work marks or effects the divide between the work and that which is exterior to it, yet within our understanding and response to the work this boundary or divide between what is internal to the work and what is outside of it becomes invisible: 'There is always a form on a ground, but the *parergon* is a form which has as its traditional determination not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy' (Derrida, 1987, p. 61). In the paragraph immediately preceding this Derrida states:

> *Parerga* have a thickness, a surface which separates them not only (as Kant would have it) from the integral inside, from the body proper of the ergon, but also from the outside, from the wall on which the painting is hung, from the space in which statue or column is erected, then, step by step, from the whole field of historical, economic, political inscription in which the drive to signature is produced (an analogous problem we shall see further on). No 'theory', no 'practice', no 'theoretical practice' can intervene effectively in this field if it does not weigh up and bear on the frame, which is the decisive structure of what is at stake, at the invisible limit to (between) the interiority of meaning (put under shelter by the whole of hermeneuticist, semioticist, phenomenologicalist, and formalist tradition) and (to) all the empiricisms of the extrinsic which, incapable of either seeing or reading, miss the question completely. (Derrida, 1987, pp. 60–1)

In this characterization of the frame, of its 'self-effacement', of its fundamental role in the bounding and structuring of the 'field' of thinking art, there is a resonance with arguments Derrida employs in his writing elsewhere. Through

addressing the *frame* of the work, a seemingly incidental feature which usually goes unnoticed, he draws attention to the limits, oppositions, and structures within which any thinking about the object is worked through. By attending to the frame he problematizes the contrasts and oppositions between what is intrinsic and what is extrinsic to the work, which have underpinned the philosophizing of art. He does this not with the aspiration of dispensing with the frame and those terms (necessary for thought),[2] but in order to disclose the mode and conditions of working of what is taken as 'given', i.e. to disclose the 'logic' of the relations between 'interiority' and 'exteriority'. This, then, can be seen as a particular instance of Derrida's fundamental and recurring argument against what he calls a 'metaphysics of presence' and for his claim about the centrality to our thought of 'différance'.

Derrida – Fundamental Argument

In other of his works Derrida challenges that a word or sign's meaning is guaranteed by something 'behind it', the thought, its signified, that which it seems to name or labels as the origin of its meaning. He typically takes a set of binary opposites in which one term is privileged as that in terms of which the other is to be explained, and shows their interdependence: that neither can be privileged as that already replete with meaning, as the 'origin', back to which a guarantee of meaning can be traced, but that each is only intelligible in relation to the other. For instance Culler (Culler, 1983, pp. 87–8) in his exposition gives the example of 'cause' and 'effect', in which cause is taken as primary: we think of an effect (as an effect) as a result of a cause. He points out that it is possible to reverse this and argue that a cause only becomes a cause in virtue of there being an effect: it is the effect that deems the cause a cause. Or to take the Saussurian example: in claiming that signs only take on meaning within a system (langue) we seem to be privileging the system over individual utterances (parole); alternatively we might as persuasively argue that individual utterances are necessary for a system itself to come into being. What emerges from the possibility of reversing the 'privileging' of the terms, or the possibility of privileging each of them, is that it makes no sense to privilege either. Rather than being able to take one as the beginning of a chain through which we can explain the meaning of the other we are shown to be chasing round in a circle. It is at this point that Derrida introduces the concept of 'différance': in rejecting the idea that the conditions of meaning can be accounted for by breaking the circle, by 'grounding' it in something thought to be directly present to experience, in 'presence', he argues that what subtends the possibility of meaning is the 'gap' or 'space' between the concepts, an absence (Derrida, 1981, pp. 38–9).

The positing of the 'gap' or 'space' between concepts as that which is fundamental, as that which has to be taken as a 'given' in order for meaning to transpire, owes much to the thinking of Saussure; in particular, as does much

recent French theory, to two fundamental propositions he puts forward (Saussure, 1974). First, that the relation between a signifier and its signified, for example a word and its meaning, is not natural but arbitrary or conventional; secondly, that within language systems, there are no positive terms. By the latter is suggested that what enables a particular letter formation, sound or image to signify, to become a sign, is not its signified, the thought or concept to which it points, but its place within a system of difference to other letter formations, sounds, etc. For example, much as we are inclined to think that gesturally applied thick paint is naturally expressionistic, what, on this mode of thinking, would explain that signification is not a connection to the emotions or feelings behind it, but its difference as a way of handling paint from that to be found, for example, in Courbet's work (some concern with which one can see in the works of Rauschenberg and Johns). In Derrida's argument one still finds the idea of tracing things backwards, a search for a 'prime cause', for a root or ground which underpins the possibility of meaning, but in his case we arrive not at a presence, but an absence: it is the 'in-placedness' of the spacing, the 'difference', that has to be acknowledged, a 'non originary' origin (see Benjamin, 1989).

Derrida – Parergon

To return to the art example, Derrida's concept of the parergon, the frame, can be seen as an exemplification or embodiment of the concept of 'differance'. The frame of the work is the 'spacing' which divides and produces the terms we think of a positive, object and wall, art work and context, etc. But again, though in our thinking here we assume we are working with an opposition and a hierarchy of such terms in which one of the terms can be taken as primary and grounded, the intelligibility of each of the terms can only be grasped *in relation to* the other. In that respect, a condition of the intelligibility of any term is its relation to that which it is not, that which it is different from. The *what-it-is-not, the what-it-is-different-from is not in that sense contingent knowledge, take it or leave it knowledge in relation to the concept, but necessary for its understanding*. There is therefore a sense in which that which we take as distinct from or external to the concept could be said to be not external at all. In our thinking and experience, physical objects, for example, are taken as bounded, distinct from and opposed to that which surrounds them, (ambient) space. Yet, we might argue, it is only in so far as we have an understanding of the very thing that physical objects are being marked off from, that the concept of physical object becomes intelligible to us.

If a system of differentiation is a logical condition of our thinking then the distinction between 'internality' and 'externality' seems something inescapable. But if, as Derrida argues, the intelligibility of each of these terms is dependent on its relation to the other, each will be reciprocally productive and determining of the meaning of the other. In talking about art the general distinction between

an 'art work' and that extrinsic to it is fundamental, it structures our practices: we take it that there is an 'art work', the 'work itself', and that external to it are various social and historical contexts, theories, critical discussions, etc. and we can bring material from the one to bear on the other. It is in the unproblematic acceptance of this fundamental assumption, as we saw above, that Derrida locates the problem of thinking art: that theorizing has focused exclusively either on the 'interiority' of the work ('hermeneuticist, semioticist' etc), or the 'exteriority' ('all the empiricism of the extrinsic'). The implication of Derrida's thought is that the 'work itself', what we perceive it specifically to be, how we understand and respond to it, i.e. our vision of its 'interiority', will be formed and informed by what we take and bring to it as 'exterior'.

Another way of intimating what is at issue here would be to say that in so far as most art objects have been physical objects it has been assumed that the conditions necessary to identify an art object as a (physical) object have been taken as sufficient to identify it as an art object. To understand and experience what a physical object is, it was argued above, certain conditions have to obtain. In relation to that understanding and experience, theory, criticism, historical context etc., are exterior to the object. However, what Derrida is claiming, to put it sharply, is that this is precisely not the case when understanding and experiencing something as an art work or object. It is this issue that will be addressed more closely by examining an example of theorizing from the art world.

Thinking the Art Object – a Concrete, or rather, Plywood, Example

A particular article written in the 1960s by the American sculptor Don Judd, 'Specific objects', came to have a seminal influence on both the art practice and the criticism of the succeeding twenty or so years. Judd's thinking on the conditions of meaning of art works is in direct opposition to that offered within Derrida's work. Rather than perceiving the meaning of a sign to be relational, as dependent on the relations within which it is embedded, and its specific meaning as dependent upon that in relation to which it is located, as in Derrida's account, Judd writes of the meaning of the art work as immanent, as somehow residing in the work itself.

In common with other American critics of the 1960s Judd argues forcefully for the self-sufficiency and autonomy of the work of art.[3] He elaborates on our understanding of the nature of the work he is promoting ('literalist' work, in essence Minimalist sculpture), through distinguishing it from what it is not: its 'literalness' is spelt out in terms of its being nonillusionistic, nonallusionistic, nonreferential, nonrepresentational, etc. (Judd, 1965). 'Literal' is also used within Judd's essay to signify that the meaning of the object is given by or consists in just *what is there*: the obdurate thing, its materials, the simple relation of its parts, etc. As the painter Frank Stella also said at this time, 'only what can be seen *is* there. . . . What you see is what you see' (Glaser, 1966, p. 158).

What is problematic here can be brought out if we remind ourselves that there is a perfectly legitimate way of describing what we *literally* see when we look at a Judd work: we see a plywood box of certain dimensions with a recessed edge, or say in the case of Carl André, what can be seen is a pile of one hundred and twenty fire bricks in a certain arrangement. But this is not of course what Judd means when he says of the object that it is literal, that its meaning is given by what is literally there, for Judd is not talking about objects that are simply plywood boxes or piles of bricks but about objects that are art. Yet if we look at the plywood box, or at the pile of bricks, but are unable to see the art work, there is nothing more to see, there is no further 'literal' property that we have overlooked that is going to make visible its artness. In order to 'see' the sculpture what we need is something that is precisely not given so simply to sight: only when we see the box or bricks within the context of certain artistic issues and values do they take on the meanings of art. It is only because these relations, for example, what it is for an art work to be referential, illusionistic, or whatever, are put into play but not overtly acknowledged, that the idea of an object which eschews these things, that has no relations, seems to become intelligible to us. When we perceive the object (simply) as a plywood box, such relations are, one might say, exterior to the object or contingent to it. But in so far as the object is perceived as a work of art those relations are internal and necessary; without them the object which is the object of art/the aesthetic does not come into being. These relations are then not mere 'supplements', but as Derrida would argue, constitutive of the work and what is seen as interior to it.[4]

This is one way in which Derrida's arguments within *The Truth in Painting* raise profound problems for ideas of the autonomy of art objects, and by implication the rationale of an art practice or criticism that is grounded on them.

Implications for Theory and Criticism

If we take seriously the idea that the work of art as an object of experience, or an object of criticism, only comes into being through its relations to ideas and concerns which position its ontological status (i.e. that it is an art work and not some other sort of thing) and its meaning, then it would follow that theory, in the sense of having epistemological commitments, is always at work in the work and in critical response to it. There is no 'work of art' without theory being at work, and no 'object of criticism' without the workings of theory.[5] Such an idea is evidently at odds with our most commonly held idea of criticism as an activity which in some sense involves the 'translation' or 'interpretation' into words of the object's meaning. The notions of translation and interpretation both assume the possibility of recourse to an object understood to be independent of or anterior to the operations in question. And it is this which Derrida's thought denies (see Benjamin, 1989).

How then, following Derrida, can the nature and operations of criticism be characterized? One thing that might be said is that criticism has of necessity a performative aspect. Criticism constructs and puts into place those relations without which the object lacks its specific identity. This is not merely a textual activity however, since it is also central to other processes of meaning production within art culture, for example the 'locating' and 'placing' that are achieved 'nonverbally' through the relations in which works are produced and are hung in galleries and museums. Furthermore, there is no criticism (or artmaking for that matter) without such knowledge being at work, being assumed or emplaced. Criticism and practice always involve, are never free of, epistemological commitments. We might also say that in so far as meaning is relational it is conditional: in claiming that a particular object means such and such, that claim will of necessity be in relation to some body of knowledge.

If this is right, it casts most current criticism in a disconcerting light. In innumerable exhibition guides, catalogues, journal articles and newspaper reviews, under the guise of an exclusive concern to present the meaning of the work, certain relations are taken as already in place but not 'spoken': that is, the placing of the work for the reader is effected by presenting to the reader a work that has already been positioned in relation to a set of knowledges or theory, which the reader is taken as already sharing, or recruited into. But perhaps at least as disconcerting for our current practices of criticism are the implications of Derrida's ideas for our understanding of critical disagreements. It is this with which I want to end by briefly touching on such disagreements in relation to recent artistic practice.

From the perspective articulated by Judd and embraced by many 'modernist' critics much of the art work produced in the 1980s and 1990s, that which has often been designated 'postmodern', has been judged negatively. For example in an essay of 1987, Lyn Cooke, overtly referencing Judd, and asserting the 'centrality' of Minimalism as a paradigm for sculptural practice, scrutinizes work made by Haim Steinbach against the criteria of the works being 'literal, assertive, and declarative . . .' 'as physical entities', and finds that in those terms they are severely lacking. The works – in essence consisting of hand-fabricated, wall-mounted, laminated 'shelf' units on which a variety of chosen prefabricated objects from our culture are arranged in various combinations – are dismissed as showing 'the patterning and permutating that stores like Habitat specialise in their displays for coordinated living' (Cooke, 1987). Perhaps not surprisingly, viewed from this perspective the work appears trivial and inadequate, not least because it fails to fulfil several of Judd's prescriptions for sculpture: it is not 'whole' without parts, nor given it has parts are they unitary; it does not eschew reference, etc. We might acknowledge however, that the social significations and allusions of the objects out of which Steinbach's work is made, the referentiality, rather than being irrelevant to the work's meaning and a sign of its inadequacy, could have a different significance. The shelves can be taken as alluding to Minimalist sculpture and in particular Judd's work, but they also have a resem-

blance (as Cooke recognizes) to particular shop display units, and to domestic shelves (they are 'Memphis'-like). Each of these references puts into play knowledges of different kinds of social spaces, different expectations of the kind of objects we are to encounter on the shelves, and different concepts of appropriate forms of 'looking'. The play of these references could be seen as drawing attention to and destabilizing or unfixing relations that we normally take for granted. The objects placed upon the shelves are drawn from our culture ready-made, for the most part are mass-produced, and are difficult to see in separation from their meaning and social history and placement within that culture. Yet all this is presented in the context of a gallery as art. Placed in relation to Derrida's account of the framing of meaning, Steinbach's work appears less as inadequate 'Modernist' sculpture than as work which challenges the epistemological commitments upon which Modernist judgements about art and sculpture in particular are based. Through its combination of elements and the use of 'non-art' objects in the work in a specific presentational form, Steinbach's work can be seen as a meditation on where the meaning of objects resides; the signification of his inclusion of 'non-art' objects taken not as confirming the much circulated claim that the distinction between art and non-art has been effaced, but as an interrogation of where the grounds for that distinction reside, intimating that the meaning and status of objects is to be found not in the objects themselves, but in their relations with the social, institutional and discursive realms within which they circulate and are encountered. And that this, despite what Judd and other Modernists have claimed, is true for the objects we call art too.

What appears here initially as a disagreement about the quality and meaning of an object I am suggesting is a more profound dispute. There is a sense in which one might even say that the opposing protagonists perceive different objects, since as soon as one gets beyond securing an identifying reference, for example that it is a Steinbach about which one is speaking, there is disagreement not just over what it signifies but over what counts as the object's salient (signifying) features. What is in opposition in such debates is how the work is to be located, in relation to what it is to be read, which epistemology is to count. Something similar could perhaps be said of the brief analysis here offered of the Modernist–Postmodernist art debate itself; it is being read in relation to certain epistemological commitments; if nothing else the impossibility of avoiding that might be seen as some confirmation of Derrida's position.

Notes

1 For example, Linker, 1982 and 1984; Foster, 1983, 1986a, 1986b and 1989. The Baudrillard text principally drawn from in this writing is Baudrillard, 1983.

2 Derrida 1987, p. 73: 'Philosophy wants to arraign it [the frame] and can't manage it. But what has produced and manipulated the frame puts everything to work in order to efface the frame effect, most often by naturalising it to infinity, in the hands of God (one can verify this in Kant). Deconstruction must neither reframe nor dream

of the pure and simple absence of the frame. These two apparently contradictory gestures are the very ones – and they are systematically indissociable – of *what* is here deconstructed.'

3 Here I am thinking particularly of the criticism of Michael Fried as well as that of Don Judd. Though at the time they perceived themselves to be offering different paradigms of art (see Fried, 1967), Judd through his concept of 'literalness' which marked out ground in opposition to Fried's Modernist notion of 'presentness', retrospectively the consensus is that Judd was working within the modernist paradigm (see for example Krauss, 1977, Foster, 1986a). And by implication, despite and beneath their differences, they shared epistemological allegiances.

4 An analogous argument could be rehearsed with regard to Fried's concepts of 'presentness' and Modernist painting.

5 To claim the former, it should be stressed, is not equivalent to claiming or implying that all art works are overtly 'theoretical' or concerned with their own ontological status.

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Chapter 29

What Consciousness Forgets: Lyotard's Concept of the Sublime

Renée van de Vall

The Voice

Barnett Newman's painting *The Voice* from 1950, in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is not a large painting. Measuring 96 by 108 inches, it does not give the spectator the feeling of being overwhelmed by spatial magnitude, in contrast with other paintings by Newman, such as *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* or *Cathedra*. Its impact is of a more subtle kind. The painting shows a thin vertical line on the far left of a creamy white field. The line is painted in a hue slightly darker than the background and is at first hardly visible. But once it is noticed it is impossible to ignore it, although the overall composition of the painting almost asks the spectator to overlook it. The white field is soft, cloudy, inviting a dreaming gaze. At first the line presents itself very modestly, as a slight ripple giving depth to its ground, placed aside as an afterthought, almost too far from the centre to be part of the painting. But gradually it grows stronger, stubbornly refusing to go away and checking every tendency of the gaze to lose itself in the misty white of the background. What was unobtrusive at first, merely a ripple, grows in visual importance and acquires a forceful presence, strong as an iron cable or bar. If Newman has painted a voice here, it must have been an inner voice. The dynamics of the painting resembles the slow but irrevocable dawning of an unexpected and maybe even unwanted insight, such as the disturbing feeling of an obligation or a vocation.

If *The Voice* may be called sublime, it is not in the sense usually given to the pictorial sublime in Abstract Expressionism, that is in terms of the feeling of spatial limitlessness provided by large colour fields. Its sublimity lies rather in the *insistence* of the line, an insistence that makes itself felt as a temporal play with our attention. This play is not only pleasurable. There is an irritated feeling, resulting from the frustration of a wish for an undisturbed, pleasurable experience of dreaming away, by the ever stronger and disturbing presence of what at first seemed a detail. But there is also a sense of being kept awake, of being

addressed or called upon, or even of being guided, by a pictorial feature emerging out of invisibility.

The Sublime as a Breach in the Given Itself

It is as if the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1927–98) thought of *The Voice* in particular when he wrote about Newman's oeuvre:

> Newman is concerned with giving colour, line or rhythm the force of an obligation within a face-to-face relationship, in the second person, and his model cannot be *Look at this (over there)*; it must be *Look at me* or, to be more accurate, *Listen to me*. For obligation is a modality of time rather than space and its organ is the ear rather than the eye.[1]

Two thoughts should be noticed here, as they are essential for Lyotard's philosophy of the sublime. The first is that colour, line or rhythm are not considered for what they might portray: it is presence, rather than representation that makes them sublime. And the second is that even in a visual art like painting, sublimity is primarily a matter of time, not space. As Lyotard said in an interview to Christine Pries, Newman was one of the sources of his interest in the concept of the sublime.[2] Newman's theoretical text 'The sublime is now' and several of the titles of his paintings, such as *Here*, *Not There, Here*, *Now* and *Be,* indicate, according to Lyotard, a sense of place and time that cuts across the spatio-temporal coherence of conscious experience.

> Newman's *now* which is no more than a *now* is a stranger to consciousness and cannot be constituted by it. Rather, it is what dismantles consciousness, it is what consciousness cannot formulate, and even what consciousness forgets in order to constitute itself.[3]

Consciousness demands an undisrupted connection of space continuing, time passing, events happening. Dreading the possibility of a void, of nothing happening, it is not able to think the occurrence of an event in its singularity and contingency. We can only think an occurrence as such, if we allow for the possibility that it could not have happened, even that nothing could have happened at all. Lyotard expresses this awareness in the question *Is it happening?* Not *what* is happening is doubted, but *that* something happens at all. This awareness evokes suspense, anxiety, fear – and then joy if something happens nonetheless: 'the joy obtained by the intensification of being that the event brings with it'.[4] The sublime is the feeling evoked by this awareness of a possible ontological void: 'The sublime is a kind of hole, a breach in the given itself'.[5]

Heterogeneity and Philosophical Reflection

The sublime has been developed into an aesthetic concept in the course of the eighteenth century, serving to name and to explain feelings of 'terrible joy' and 'delightful horror' evoked by natural phenomena like mountains, oceans and volcanoes. Before that time it was used according to the tradition of ancient rhetoric, as a concept indicating a grand and elevated style of public speaking. Crucial for the transition from a rhetoric to an aesthetics of the sublime was Boileau's translation (1674) of the treatise *Peri Hupsous*, dating from the first century BC and mistakenly attributed to Dionysius Longinus. Longinus's text contained a latent conception of sublimity as a quality of mind and experience that was enthusiastically taken up by eighteenth-century critics wishing to come to terms with writers such as Milton or Shakespeare, whose works did not meet the classicist standards of beauty.[6] It found philosophical articulation as a counterpart of the beautiful in the aesthetic writings of Edmund Burke (1757) and Immanuel Kant (1790). The empiricist Burke explained the sublime delight in the overwhelming and terrible as resulting from the subject's physiological and psychological reactions on perceptual features of natural objects or artworks. Kant's transcendental philosophy described it in terms of a discord between imagination and reason, pointing to the superior ability of reason to think infinity. In painting, the vastness and turmoil of the mountain scenes and seascapes of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) and Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851) testified to an immanent spiritual meaning of nature.[7]

In his adaptation of the concept Lyotard maintained the contradictory structure of the sublime feeling, in which pain is mixed with pleasure, terror with delight. The idea of a terror inspired by the possibility of a void he derived from Edmund Burke's section on privation: 'All *general* privations are great, because they are all terrible; Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude and Silence'.[8] The notion of the sublime as a breach in the given recalls Kant's aesthetics, on which Lyotard has published a detailed commentary, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*. Lyotard agrees with Kant that experiential coherence presupposes a synthesis, an act of connection bringing unity in the diversity of what is given. The feeling of the sublime is evoked when this unity is first threatened, then restored at another level of consciousness.

However, Lyotard departs from Kant in two respects. To begin with, Kant denied that art could be sublime. In contrast to beauty, defined by Kant as 'the form of finality in an object, so far as perceived in it apart from an end', the sublime cuts across every experience of finality or form. Sublime feelings are evoked by those natural phenomena that are too large to be comprehended by the imagination or too powerful to be resisted by our physical capacities. It is through this absence of encompassing form and denial of natural purpose in experience that the spectator is made aware of the powers of a higher faculty and a higher goal: those of reason. What imagination cannot comprehend, infinity,

reason is able to think as an Idea. Hence the joy we feel. According to Kant, works of art can never be an occasion for these feelings, because they always show discernible form and are created by purposeful acts. In response, Lyotard has answered that what matters most in Kant's 'Analytic of the sublime' is that something 'unformed' is incommensurable with the synthesis of the imagination. Lyotard claims that abstract or minimal art may very well be able to bring about the same kind of breach in the formal synthesis of consciousness as natural formlessness does.[9]

A second difference is that Lyotard's sublime functions in the context of a philosophy that sets great store by heterogeneity. Consciousness tries to bring unity in experience, but this unity, if it is brought about at all, is the result of an arbitrary imposition instead of being presupposed as a universal condition of experience. In fact, consciousness itself is secondary, its contents being derived from what might be considered the 'prime movers' in Lyotard's later philosophy, genres of discourse in a broad sense of the term. As described in *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* they are primarily conceived as linguistic genres: 'Genres of discourse supply rules for linking together heterogeneous phrases, rules that are proper for attaining certain goals: to know, to teach, to be just, to seduce, to justify, to evaluate, to rouse emotion, to oversee'.[10] But in other essays cultural 'disciplines', 'traditions' and 'institutions' seem to fill a comparable role, as we shall see with regard to the sublime in art.

In his emphasis on the subordination of consciousness to language and on the heterogeneity of discursive genres, Lyotard continues the later work of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, yet aims to undo what he sees as the remnants of anthropomorphism in these. To him the subject is nothing more than 'the addresser instance' of a phrase, appearing and disappearing with the phrase's universe.[11] His 'philosophizing' starts from '[t]he only [object] that is indubitable, the phrase, because it is immediately presupposed'.[12] Just as Descartes argued that one could doubt every object of thought, but not the act of thinking itself, so Lyotard writes that doubting that one phrase is still to phrase. After a phrase always comes another phrase – silence is a phrase as well. The question is: which phrase? The linking of phrases is necessary, but how to link is contingent. Different genres of discourse supply different sets of possible phrases to link onto the current one, and there is no universal genre of discourse that has the authority to decide between the competing options. The 'differend' of the title of the book refers to this absence of a universal rule of judgement between heterogeneous genres: differends are those conflicts between at least two parties, 'that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments'.[13]

Not even philosophy can provide such a universal rule of judgement. For Lyotard, genuine philosophy is reflective in Kant's sense: instead of imposing its own universal rules to determine particular cases, as determinative judgement does, reflective judgement starts from the particular to discover the appropriate rules. In Lyotard's philosophy, these particular cases are characteristically cases

of differend. When differends are not acknowledged, for instance when a specific discourse claims universal validity, a wrong (in French: *tort*) arises. Philosophical reflection cannot 'solve' differends: that would be another universalist strategy, bringing only another wrong. But reflection may try to formulate hidden differends and clarify the rules of the genres involved. The stake of Lyotard's book is 'to save the honour of thinking' by 'showing that the linking of one phrase to another is problematic'. It is to 'bear witness to the differend' (Lyotard, 1988, pp. xii–xiii).

Reflection itself is under a threat. From 'inside' philosophy, academic discourse challenges reflection's commitment to indeterminateness with its claims to mastery. From the 'outside' it is the economic genre that threatens to usurp a universal role, claiming economic success as the ultimate goal of every activity of thought. Because success depends from gaining time, reflection is condemned as a waste of time, being 'good for nothing'. Reflection not only obstructs the efficiency of connecting means to ends by bearing witness to differends between discourses other than its own. It has to fight out its own differend with the discourse of economic calculation that has as a rule 'that what happens can happen only if it has already been paid back, and therefore has already happened' (Lyotard, 1988, p. xiii). The economic genre is determinative through and through. To be able to survive, the reflective mode of thinking will have to resist such claims for a mastery over time. 'Reflection requires that you watch out for occurrences, that you don't already know what's happening. It leaves open the question *Is it happening?* [*Arrive-t-il?*] It tries to keep up with the now.'[14]

The Sublime of the Avant-Garde

Lyotard, then, denies the possibility of an overarching philosophical discourse unifying the heterogeneity of discursive genres. Instead he pleads for a conception of philosophical reflection that is susceptible to silences: the silence of a conflict that cannot be formulated, of an experience that cannot be told. The task of art is comparable with that of philosophical reflection: to safeguard openness for the indeterminate. This explains why time is so important in Lyotard's philosophy of the artistic sublime. Both philosophy and art have to resist any attempt to gain mastery over time. Avant-garde art does so by questioning the rules and aims of art itself:

> When Cézanne picks up his paint-brush, what is at stake in painting is put into question; when Schönberg sits down at his piano, what is at stake in music; when Joyce grabs hold of its pen, what is at stake in literature. Not only are new strategies for 'gaining' tried out, but the nature of 'success' is questioned. Is it still a matter of 'pleasing' through the beautiful, or of 'pleasing/displeasing' through the sublime? Aren't the stakes analogous, rather, to those that orient the 'philosophical' genre?[15]

These avant-garde questionings should not be equated with the militant proclamations that so often go with them. Just as philosophical reflection has to defend itself against the rules of academic discourse, so art has to be careful to steer clear of artistic programmes – regardless of whether they are formulated by academies or by avant-garde manifestos. The latter, no less than philosophy as an academic discipline, seek 'to determine what has already been thought, written, painted or socialised in order to determine what hasn't been'.[16] Both the curriculum and the manifesto try to determine the indeterminate by taking an option on the next moment. What has not yet happened should resemble what has – or be radically different from what went before. Both forget the contingency of every linking:

> the possibility of nothing happening, of words, colours, sounds not coming; of this sentence being the last, of bread not coming daily. This is the misery that the painter faces with a plastic surface, of the musician with the acoustic surface, the misery the thinker faces with a desert of thought, and so on. Not only faced with the empty canvas or the empty page, at the 'beginning' of the work, but every time something has to be waited for, and thus forms a question at every point of questioning [*point d'interrogation*], at every 'and what now?'[17]

It is at the point of such questionings that one exposes oneself to suspense, anxiety, fear. But the suspense can also be accompanied by intense joy that something happens. This is what Newman indicated in his titles, according to Lyotard. By seeking sublimity in the here-and-now, Newman recognized that the fundamental task of art is 'that of bearing pictorial or otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible',[18] not by seeking this in another time or place, but in the painting itself. It is the recognition of this task, to bear witness to the inexpressible occurrence of painting that characterizes true avant-garde art.

Lyotard has to admit that there is something paradoxical in this conception of sublimity in art. The paradox is that art has to testify to the indeterminate but can only do so in a determinate fashion. The paradox disappears if the task of bearing witness to the indeterminate is equated with the avant-garde questionings of pictorial tradition. From Cézanne onwards, avant-garde artists have asked the question 'What is a painting?' and have brushed aside what were supposed to be its elementary constituents: figuration, form, colour, object, even spaces for display.

One should be careful, however, not to mistake these investigations for a search for innovation, or to confuse true avant-garde art with the present-day, commercially induced proliferation of new styles. The feeling of the sublime is not a mere 'shock of the new'. 'The occurrence, the *Ereignis*, has nothing to do with the *petit frisson*, the cheap thrill, the profitable pathos, that accompanies an innovation.'[19] The difference between sublimity and innovation lies in the work's relation to time:

> Through innovation, the will affirms its hegemony over time. It thus conforms to the metaphysics of capital, which is a technology of time. The innovation 'works'. The question mark of the *Is it happening?* stops. With the occurrence, the will is defeated. The avant-gardist task remains that of undoing the presumption of the mind with respect to time. The sublime feeling is the name of this privation.[20]

In this diatribe against innovation Lyotard seems to distance himself from a distinction he has earlier made: that between a modern and a postmodern sublime.[21] In Lyotard's earlier text, the *Postmodern Condition*, an art work may present the unpresentable in two ways. It can either allude to an unpresentable presence longed for but lost: this was the *melancholia* or nostalgic mode of the modern sublime. Or it can emphasize the power of thinking, the increase of being and the elated joy of the invention of new rules for painting or art: the postmodern mode of *novatio*. Whereas the nostalgic mode points to the unpresentable as an absent content, the mode of *novatio* refers to the unpresentable in the presentation itself by searching for new presentations. It does this not to promote the aesthetic enjoyment of good forms, but to sharpen the sense of the unpresentable. German Expressionism, Malevich, De Chirico and Proust are ranged on the nostalgic side; Bracque, Picasso, Lissitsky, Duchamp and Joyce on the other. It should be noted, however, that the distinction between modern and postmodern in this earlier essay is a very fluid one. Here the postmodern is a recurrent part of the modern, it is the modern in its experimental stages. In the same way, both modes of the sublime may be present in the oeuvre of one artist, even in one single work.

When in the later work Lyotard denies that the sublime has anything to do with innovation, he seems to disavow this second, postmodern mode of the sublime. But it can be argued that there is a difference between *novatio* and innovation, a difference that lies in the degree of determinateness of their results. Whereas innovation has a previously established aim, the avant-garde *novatio* is a play with possibilities without a preconceived outcome. And even in its elated joy the postmodern sublime has a certain ascetic austerity: it is not to lead to an aesthetic consummation of pleasurable forms.

The Paradox of the Artistic Sublime

Lyotard's account of the avant-garde sublime has several merits. It disconnects the sublime in art from superficial formal criteria, such as the presence of large colour fields. It frees the history of the avant-garde in art from a merely political explanation on the one hand and a merely formalist account on the other. It reintegrates formal experiment and political stake in a more sophisticated way as it seeks the political task of avant-garde art in maintaining sensitivity to what remains outside discourse and eludes temporal determination. It infuses artistic creation with the seriousness of the age-old metaphysical wondering: that there is something instead of nothing. Yet it locates the sublimity of art not in its

allusion to a transcendent realm, but in the here and now of the work's sensible materiality.

Yet Lyotard's concept of the sublime is not without difficulties. It is not clear why the task of 'undoing the presumption of the mind with respect to time' (Lyotard, 1988, pp. 106–7) should be exclusively connected with the avant-garde questioning of the rules of art; nor why these questionings by themselves would evoke sublime feelings. Even if we allow that art works that seem to contradict our expectations may constitute a breach in our experience, how do we account then for our feelings of joy? And what happens when the newness of the work has waned? Will its sublimity have vanished with it?

These questions arise in part because of Lyotard's apparent distrust of artistic form, any form, as being determinate. In fact, Lyotard's descriptions of what actually happens in the experience of sublime art works are somewhat disappointing. 'In the determination of pictorial art, the indeterminate, the "it happens" is the paint, the picture. The paint, the picture as occurrence or event, is not expressible, and it is to this that it has to witness.'[22] It is as if were enough for a painting to 'happen' for it to be sublime. It is as if Lyotard tries to safeguard the singularity and contingency of the event by presenting it as an absolute and therefore ineffable individual. This may be correct when events as such are described, but when it comes to artistic events, we are left with too many questions. We are back at the paradox of the sublime art work that has been mentioned in the previous section. For an art work effectively to enforce a breach in our experience, it needs to be very compelling. Thwarting the fulfilment of our expectations is not enough. Barnett Newman's *The Voice* succeeds in 'undoing the presumption of the mind with respect to time' (Lyotard, 1988, pp. 106–7) because it has a very strong visual presence resulting from its composition. If the line had been wider, or had been placed somewhere else on the canvas, *The Voice* would have been a different painting. It would probably not have been able to evoke the kind of contradictory feeling we would call sublime. So *The Voice* does more than challenging once current notions of art and presenting itself as a painting nonetheless: it involves the spectator in its *own* time and place.

Lyotard seems to have sensed this incongruities himself, when in 'Anima minima' he weakened the link between sublimity and avant-garde art.[23] All great art is sublime, and in a certain sense all great art may be called avant-garde, because it witnesses to an immaterial presence through its materiality. Only in avant-garde art this witnessing is more apparent. There he also mentions *style* as what sets great art works apart, in an implicit critique on Derrida, who in *The Truth in Painting* had ascribed this function to the frame. This is an interesting remark, because it points to a possibility of solving the paradox of the sublime. Style is a particular way of doing things, but a way that cannot be determined beforehand. It develops in the doing. It is not determinate, but it isn't indeterminate either. It is individual, but not by being completely inarticulate, unstructured or without form. Such a concept of style cuts through a dichotomy that seems to pervade and to hamper Lyotard's theory of art: that between the

determinate and the indeterminate, between what is formed and therefore liable to control and what is resistant to control by being spasmodic. In the same vein a work of art may manifest a formal openness without being formless; it may draw, keep and guide our attention without completely determining it. Some works do so and thereby involve us in contradictory experiences. They disturb us and yet fascinate us in such a profound way that it seems something crucial is at stake: our awareness of being, or of destiny, or of obligation. Such works may be called sublime.

Notes

1 'Newman: The instant', in Lyotard (1991), p. 81.
2 'Das Undarstellbare – Wider das Vergessen. Ein Gespräch zwischen Jean-François Lyotard und Christine Pries', in Pries (1989), pp. 319–20.
3 'The Sublime and the avant-garde', in Lyotard (1991), p. 90.
4 Ibid., p. 92.
5 'Das Undarstellbare', p. 321.
6 Monk (1960), pp. 10–27.
7 See e.g. Rosenblum (1975), pp. 10–40; Wilton (1980), p. 102.
8 Burke (1987), p. 71.
9 'Das Undarstellbare', p. 322.
10 Lyotard (1988), p. xii.
11 Ibid., pp. 33–4.
12 Ibid., p. xi.
13 Ibid., p. xi.
14 Ibid., pp. xv–xvi.
15 Ibid., p. 139.
16 'The sublime', p. 91.
17 Ibid., pp. 91–2.
18 Ibid., p. 93.
19 Ibid., p. 106.
20 Ibid., pp. 106–7.
21 'Answering the question: What is postmodernism?', in Lyotard (1984).
22 'The sublime', p. 93.
23 'Anima minima', in Lyotard (1997).

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Chapter 30

Deleuze on Francis Bacon

Ian Heywood

Deleuze and Modern French Theory

The philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925–95) belongs to a generation of French philosophers and theorists, the best-known being perhaps Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and François Lyotard, whose works have exercised an enormous influence across many fields in the post-war period. (For an invaluable bibliography of Deleuze's works see that compiled by Murphy in Patton, 1996.) It is difficult to estimate in detail the effect on art practice and theory of this complex, heterogeneous body of ideas but it is safe to say that it has been considerable, if only because it has shaped much recent academic and critical thinking about many aspects of cultural life. It is worth recalling that since the 1960s it has become increasingly common for not only potential art historians, critics and curators but also for aspiring artists to receive their specialist training in university departments, and in this way a significant proportion of those who go on to be active in visual art have inevitably been exposed to ideas many of their teachers have regarded not only as radical and penetrating but also glamorously contemporary. Assumptions and values at various levels in the art world have been moulded by popular interpretations of leading theorists, whether or not their works are formally studied or even mentioned.

Why is Deleuze significant to contemporary art theory? First, *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation* (1981) is a major critical study of the work of a leading modern painter which also introduces Deleuze's general theory of art. Second, like Lyotard's *Discours*, *figure* (1971) and Derrida's *La vérité en peinture* (1978) it is important as an example of a confrontation between a writer strongly connected to an influential approach to contemporary theory, which many would call 'Poststructuralism', and visual art. The intellectual environment provided by this approach is complicated, not to say often convoluted, but of particular importance here are: the continued and growing influence of Nietzsche and Freud; the attempt to reject or at least undermine all philosophical concepts seen as

'metaphysical', specifically the idea of the human subject, either individual or collective, as an underlying, unified foundation for philosophical speculation and political practice; an overriding concern for 'difference', that is, for the profound and irreconcilable variety of things, especially in respect to human values and ways of life. Third, irrespective of the coherence of his overall position or the acceptability of his specific critical judgements, in this work and others Deleuze has many insightful things to say about art, and painting in particular. He is a philosopher whose sensitivity to visual art is unusually acute, far more so than Lyotard or Derrida for example.

Finally, like Lyotard, Deleuze is explicitly concerned with the important problem of the relationship between theorizing or philosophy and art. Questions about the relationship between word and image, discourse and figure, the textual and the visual have come increasingly to the fore in recent years. The difficulty of summarizing the issue will be amply demonstrated by even a cursory glance at the exhaustive discussion of its development in French thought in Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes* (Jay, 1993; also Herwitz, 1993, Heywood, 1997 and Stafford, 1996). Nevertheless, at the risk of over-simplification, post-war French theory has been steered by critical, not to say political, motives. From Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty to Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard, French intellectuals have been expected, almost required, to be politically engaged and to act as leaders of progressive political opinion. This deeply rooted critical impulse, sustained in part by public expectations, was in the first two decades of the post-war period primarily shaped by an encounter with Marxism and the organized Left, specifically the French communist party (PCF), an often troubled relationship which changed dramatically after the failure of the student revolts of the late 1960s, with a general loosening or severing of the connections between intellectuals and organized politics. Although the critical spirit remained it was now more independent of the everyday realities and exigencies of political practices aimed at influencing or capturing state power. French theory became both more anarchic and more symbolic, and in these respects at least came to resemble cultural subversions traditionally associated with artistic avant-garde movements like Surrealism.

There are different ways of describing the target of this critique: bourgeois order and stability, the deadening routines of everyday and political life, an invisible but pervasive and suffocating central, unifying power, the distortion of personal identity by the repression of our deepest impulses. Certainly sexual, aesthetic and cultural politics came largely to supplant older forms based on class and party. Defenders of this post-1960s shift would argue that it represented and indeed required a genuine radicalization of philosophical criticism. What was needed was a critique of *all* the apparatuses of power, not just those identified as such by conventional politics. In a Gallic version of what Richard Rorty famously called the 'linguistic turn', structural and semiotic approaches to language derived from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure fused with a Marxist-inspired interest in the critique of ideology. Culture generally came to be seen

as a series of systems of representation and their diverse products: specific ideas, values, personality structures, all contributing to a given set of social institutions and systems of power.

The importance in modern societies of visual images and phenomena of many kinds – fashion, advertising and marketing, news reporting, television and the cinema, as well as visual art – is obvious, but at a deeper level the visual was seen to supply key metaphors and tropes to rationalizing discourses like science and even philosophy (see Sandywell in Heywood and Sandywell, 1988). An important example, for French philosophy in particular, is Descartes's identification of truth with mental representations which are 'seen' clearly and distinctly.[1] When the new cultural critique was applied to visual art great play was made of the ways in which the classical apparatus of European painting, often glossed as 'perspective', supposedly enabled the visual field to be organized, fixed, known and subjected to existing power relations. Feminist theorists developed a similar argument that most representations of women in the Western canon were organized around the demands of the male gaze, thus contributing to the subjection of women to patriarchy (see Jay, 1993, pp. 21–82).

However, consistency demanded of this generalized critique that the discourse and practices of theory should not be exempt from reflexive review. The power of abstract, universalizing concepts and arguments to define, organize and rationalize could not be ignored. If the theoretical text and its demands for clarity, logic and intelligibility was not exempt from criticism then theoretically inspired attacks on the visual, more specifically on art and its practices for their alleged confusion, opacity or lack of reflective clarity at the level of ideology, must also come under suspicion. Thus, in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) Deleuze and his long-time collaborator, the political theorist and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, praise what they see as Lyotard's defence in *Discours*, *figure* of the image (sometimes referred to as the 'figural') against the ordering powers, ultimately the totalitarian imperialism, of the word and in particular of the theoretical text (see Jay, 1993, pp. 563–73).

So it is not simply a question of a critique of the image from the position of the word or vice versa. Rather, the task is to seek out a diversity of subversive or deconstructive occasions where the fixing and ordering powers of discursive or visual practices, whether representational or analytical, come unstuck, exhibit tensions, contradictions or dislocations, where they fail to operate smoothly. It is these literally unsettling moments that provide an encounter with what our modernized form of life seeks above all to tame or exclude: the formless but liberating forces of desire, the unconscious, the unrepresentable, the other. A famous example of Lyotard's from the early period of oil painting in Western art, which is also used on the cover of *Discours*, *figure*, is the strange, anamorphic skull which disrupts the otherwise impeccable realism of Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors*, now in London's National Gallery. We will see below how these ideas are applied to works by Francis Bacon painted four centuries later.

Deleuze's Approach

While Deleuze shares in some of the preoccupations of French intellectual life outlined above, notably the rejection of the unified subject and an obsession with difference, he does not hold a 'standard' postmodern or poststructuralist position. In some respects he is highly traditional. In a 1980 interview published to accompany *A Thousand Plateaux*, he describes his work as 'philosophy, nothing but philosophy in the traditional sense'. He is also a critical philosopher, believing that insofar as philosophy embodies or aspires to the freedom or autonomy of thought then it must come into conflict with the ideologies of all established systems of power, specifically political and economic regimes. His philosophical heroes, Spinoza and Nietzsche, struggle continually against the tendency to which he thinks most academic philosophy succumbs, the recruitment of its ideas to the buttressing of the established order. The importance of criticism is constantly emphasized and often controversial in its targets. For example, many of their readers were shocked when Deleuze and Guattari, in what was to become their best-known book, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, launched a vigorous attack on Marx, Freud, and the latter's leading interpreter in post-war France Jacques Lacan. The Lacanian approach to psychoanalysis does not, they argue, offer freedom from mental suffering but seeks to constrain, direct and control the subject of analysis in the interests of a repressive capitalist system.

While claiming to be 'traditional' Deleuze nevertheless defines philosophy in an unusual way as 'the art of forming, inventing and fabricating concepts' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 2). It has nothing to do with 'contemplation, reflection, or communication' (ibid., p. 6). At its deepest level it is the *creation* of concepts. Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power is credited with having made this point decisive for modern philosophy. By philosophical concepts Deleuze has in mind for example Plato's *ideas*, Aristotle's *substance*, Descartes's *cogito*, Kant's *categories*. Such notions are, for Deleuze, more than just 'general or abstract ideas'. Being responses to problems or ambiguities of their time they have practical origins, answering specific conceptual problems but also raising others. They open up new perspectives on the world which cannot be wholly reconciled with one another, they contain differentiated components but also provide a limited unifying framework for these elements, they have a history but also a set of synchronic relations with other concepts.

This description suggests the famous rhizome concept, a multiplicity whose parts are interconnected but not according to an underlying structural order, where connections can be made at any point to any point, where new branches can grow and old ones regenerate and reconnect. The rhizome is an image of what philosophy should be, a complex, ungovernable place of spontaneous encounters and devisings standing in sharp contrast to all the efforts of systems of established power to capture, block, channel and control the force it expresses.

The philosophy of Deleuze is thus a philosophy of movement and difference, not of subject, object and the problems of their relationship. He admires in Kant an unwavering rejection of the 'banalities' of everyday opinion, of its unexamined certainties. Instead Kant devotes himself to relentless transcendental enquiry into the conditions which make possible ordinary experience. However Deleuze's analysis differs radically from Kant's. Fiercely rejecting the 'anthropomorphism and hubris' of assuming that these conditions resemble the objects of experience to which they give rise Deleuze is denied the possibility of a simple description of this 'unrepresentable ground'. A variety of indicative words must be used: chaos, chaosmos, abyss, primary libidinal process, transcendental unconscious, desiring-production, the invisible. As with Nietzsche, the primary chaos or will-to-power is understood as productive and self-organizing, and its products, syntheses of the transcendental unconscious, complex and differentiated. In particular, philosophy, science and art could be described as different types of active, productive force, with philosophy having no pre-eminence.

Deleuze offers an ontology, or doctrine of being in general, at the base of which is a dynamic process of becoming. Strictly speaking this process, which underlies everything we experience and think, must escape all representation. Yet if it is to enter into human consciousness at all, let alone be understood philosophically, there seems to be a need for a representation (or perhaps a 'presentation') of some kind. The obvious difficulty here of representing the unrepresentable is addressed not by seeking to remove philosophy from representation but by attending to those moments where representation falters. The primary process is only glimpsed where the smooth surface of everyday reality, produced by systems of representation and power, begins to warp or crack. And art is one of the places where these fault lines (or 'folds') occur. As Deleuze puts it, the drive to make art comes to those who have seen something 'too great', something 'unbearable' in life, who sense 'the mutual embrace of life with what threatens it' (ibid., p. 171), yet whose response is affirmative and active, and which, in a well-known phrase from the Francis Bacon essay, gives rise to a 'new power of laughter for the living'.

What matters here is the type of construction unique to art, and it is important to note that he includes all major forms of art: visual, literary, musical. He is emphatic on this point: 'We paint, sculpt, compose, and write with sensations. We paint, sculpt, compose and write sensations' (Deleuze, 1994, p. 166); all the arts aim to produce a 'bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensations' (ibid., p. 167). The artist must escape familiar 'lived perceptions', by which he means fixed, known objects on the one side and a specific, receptive state of the subject on the other. The elements of the work must be composed into something which can stand up for itself in order to become a new being of pure sensation. If, as is often the case with the visual arts, there is a resemblance between works and visible features of the world this is 'produced entirely by their own methods; and the smile on the canvas is made solely with colours, lines, shadow and light' (ibid., p. 166). In other words, the work of the artist is to transform, through the

methods of his or her art form, the materials employed and the work's ostensible subject matter so as to give rise to these new blocs of sensation. With painting it is the paint that must be made to smile or weep, scream or sing, writhe or sit.[2]

Deleuze highlights the capacity of art to preserve, but how and what it preserves exceed ordinary experience. Art sustains the affirmative moment in human life, but only by transcending ordinary sensation, affection, memory and opinion. Beyond commercial, historical or other extrinsic interests, the capacity of the work to preserve accounts for both the drive of the artist to fashion something which even if deliberately ephemeral is inherently strong and forceful in its construction, and for the desire of those who respond to its appeal to conserve it. 'Art undoes the triple organisation of perceptions, affections, and opinions in order to substitute a monument composed of percepts, affects, and blocs of sensation that take the place of language' (ibid., p. 176). The capacity of the work to preserve is then inextricable from its capacity to show itself, a specific bloc of sensations, as independent of the actual conditions of its production, be these the thing or moment it depicts or the impulse from which it arises. This is the very 'logic of sensation'.

Deleuze on Bacon

Volume I of *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation* presents the text of Deleuze's argument, while volume II contains nothing but illustrations of Bacon's paintings. Perhaps this striking separation between text and image implies that the independence and integrity of the image need to be protected against the appropriating force of the text, even his own? (see Polan in Boundas and Olkowski, 1994). There are some 82 works reproduced, including several triptychs, in my view of variable quality. The text is organized into 16 titled sections or 'rubrics', with an overall movement as the essay progresses from a close analysis of works to a more general exposition of Deleuze's theory of art. Throughout this rich study Deleuze manages to be by turns insightful, moving, stimulating, controversial and opaque. The points selected for discussion below represent him at his most perceptive.

Bacon, indeed all genuine painters, must manipulate and disrupt narration and simple resemblance so that the painting itself can come to stand as a coherent sensory intensity. In confronting the logic of sensation, claims Deleuze, modern painting is defined by the availability of two approaches: abstraction and defiguration, and in the twelfth rubric he provides a sympathetic interpretation of Bacon's rejection of abstraction. In their search for a wholly spiritual reality painters of geometrical abstractions like Mondrian seek to replace gesture with 'diagrammatic' optical purity. In Abstract Expressionist painting there is nothing but the manual 'all over' mark and this, together with the elimination of shapes or figures defined by contours, produces a cacophony which threatens to destroy

sensory intensity.[3] Bacon takes the path of 'defiguration', the isolation or removal of the figure from any narrative that might 'explain' it, thus seeking to limit its discursive legibility. This is another example of defiguration or the logic of sensation, a process in which sensation is foregrounded by the disruption of literal or conventional meaning.[4] Nevertheless this does not lead to pure abstraction. In his use of planes, tableaux, framing spatial structures, oval arenas, smeared paint, and in his treatment of what is still recognizable as the figure his practice of defiguration neither encodes nor departs from the visible world but 'modulates' it, transforms it into fluid, rhyzomic scenes of transformation and becoming.

Bacon's moment in the history of art is in part defined by the impact of photography, and Deleuze argues that the modern painter must contend with the contemporary proliferation of stereotyped, lazy images, many derived from photography. Bacon does not seek to ignore this powerful technology – his borrowings from Edward Muybridge are well known – but while he collected and used photographs throughout his life his unwavering commitment was to their transformation, to rid his imagination and canvases of photographic and all other visual 'clichés'. An obvious feature of Bacon's work is his striking treatment of the human figure, and there is a clear affinity between the two in their views of the body (see Boyne, 1988). In Bacon the body is never at rest, but its motions are both strange and specific. In writhings and spasms figures seem to try to take leave of themselves through one of their organs, in particular, through secretions associated with sex, vomit and excrement. It is as if the body were trying to turn itself inside out, to become fluid, more like the paint from which it is in fact made.

The Baconian figure is often also, through inner bodily mutations, 'becoming animal'. Several of his figures seem to have developed animal attributes or even to be creatures intermediate between the animal and the human. Deleuze distinguishes between the head and the face. While the latter is a reassuring point of identification the head belongs to a 'zone of indiscernability; of undecidability between man and animal' (Deleuze, 1981, p. 20). This is connected to what Deleuze sees as Bacon's emphasis on meat rather than flesh. Meat seems to be understood as flesh without the bone or animation to support it, and thus 'sliding downward' under the pull of gravity, like the body of Christ in a *pietà*. In Bacon's *Study for Portrait III* (*After the Life Mask of William Blake*) from 1955 the head resembles meat in that the supportive skull seems to play little part in structuring what we see. This is an interesting way of emphasizing that in some of Bacon's best portraits there is little emphasis on the three-dimensional form of the head. One has the impression that Bacon records something seen, yet the features – mouth, nose, ears, eyes – are typically distorted, as if thick stage make-up had been applied and then fiercely smudged, pulled and flattened. In a strange way the face *becomes* the head.

It is evident that Deleuze finds the whole idea of the extreme inner mutation of the human form magnetic. What we ordinarily regard as a human person is shown mutating under the play of otherwise invisible, nonhuman primal forces.

In the seventh rubric Deleuze talks of the 'body without organs'; this is another image of the abyss, chaos, desire. For Deleuze, what Bacon shows us is not the integrated body inhabited and controlled by the integrated ego but the figure 'becoming animal', its integration with the surrounding world making sensory organs superfluous. Sensations and thoughts do not connect subject with object, but rather at this level of experience sensations, thoughts and the world are one, the whole is already sensation. In order to reach this position, and so be able to produce the work, the painter must *become* what he or she sees. This is perhaps another way of underlining the sheer intensity of perception, the controlled *hysteria*, required of an artist.

How then should Deleuze's contribution to modern art theory be assessed? As Deleuze himself emphasizes, theory itself cannot escape suspicion. When theorists criticize or deconstruct the ideas and practices of others their own unacknowledged interests – in developing an academic career, in rationalizing a prejudice, in enjoying the trappings and pose of radicalism – might be playing a part. Deleuze and Guattari had the courage to take unusual risks with their work, the experimental style of *A Thousand Plateaux*, for example, frustrating and disappointing many of their followers. Yet their works are clearly marked by their times, in particular the sexual and artistic experimentation and student revolts of the 1960s, a disillusion with traditional political and psychotherapeutic models, and an engrossing passion for what they saw as the liberating potential of demanding, uncompromising art.

Deleuze offers many insights into individual works and artists. He understands the actual practices of art and is sensitive not only to the psychological peculiarities displayed by many creative people but more importantly to the profound resistance to conventional good sense and pressures to conform required of any genuine artist. But he also reminds artists that the nonconformism characteristic of the modern approach, the apparently extravagant demand to begin art afresh, the absolute insistence on a personal approach often in conflict with the norms of intersubjectivity and language, are conditions for practice, not its end. Deleuze is also perceptive about the inherently problematic relationship between theory and art, word and image, narrative and concept. Yet his approach to the tensions inherent in the relationship between art, science and philosophy is fundamentally optimistic, seeking to avoid reductive totalization on the one hand and its supposed postmodern antitheses on the other: playfulness, irony, pastiche. The animating and guiding values of his thought are entirely to do with commitment, seriousness and authenticity.

The aim of art theory should be to seek a full, open encounter with works in all their aspects, and from this point of view perhaps the most difficult aspect of Deleuze's approach is his Nietzschean philosophy of becoming. In a broad way this is something he has in common with the whole poststructuralist environment.[5] It has to be said however that whatever its philosophical status as ontology or critique, or its ethical, political or personal consequences the doctrine of becoming or difference sets up currents which provide visual art with specific

problems, irrespective of the enthusiasm and understanding of Nietzscheans like Deleuze for art. Deleuze wants to support the affirmative or 'creative' side of the difference-process, fundamentally to see it in a good light and thus to strengthen the impulse to live fully or authentically. Yet the overall drift is clear: the true significance of lived experience, the 'triple organisation of perceptions, affections and opinions', is the systems of representation aligned with systems of power which give rise to it; flaws or folds in these systems manifest and support a struggle for the critical autonomy of thought – ideally embodied in the creative practices of art, science and philosophy – against these systems. We have seen how Deleuze's interpretation of Bacon's uncompromising paintings forces us to confront their radically unsettling challenge. Yet what ordinary experience, works of art, and aesthetic, scientific and philosophical practices all 'express' or testify to is finally the invisible, the unrepresentable, the difference-process itself, or rather, interpretative or perspectival responses to this process, forms of active or passive force which ultimately cannot be distinguished from the process itself. There is then an inevitable and unmistakable pressure to find the ultimate meaning of works of art not in the human significance of their sensuous particularity but in their abstract, formal identity as self-dissolving instances of the difference-process. In other words, if the ultimate significance of the things we value most in works of art is only to conduct us to the vertiginous brink of a formless process of change then there are perhaps grounds for an ambivalent response to Deleuze's theory as a whole. It may be that his insight into art is enriched by the precarious place he assigns it, between the twin negations of death and chaotic primal force. Yet ultimately if death is indistinguishable from the unrepresentable ground of life then the work, an organized bloc of sensation miraculously capable of preserving and transcending our grasp of passing life, is *philosophically* speaking precarious indeed.

Notes

1 Note Lyotard's insistence that the figural is not an opposite principle, but a capacity of disruption *within* discourse.
2 Deleuze is, of course, aware of abstract art and has some interesting things to say about it; see, for example, *What is Philosophy?*, pp. 181–3.
3 With respect to Mondrian in particular this view is badly mistaken. Mondrian's work displays not the elimination of the manual mark but precision and finesse in its execution. The criticism of Abstract Expressionism would also be rejected by many.
4 Deleuze remarks that religious art needs defiguration in order to evoke a higher spiritual reality and refers in particular to El Greco's *Burial of Count Orgaz* (1586).
5 Stanley Rosen is surely right to say that 'Nietzsche is today the most influential philosopher in the Western, non-Marxist world' (Rosen, 1989, p. 189), and he is also right that 'Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche is crucial for our understanding of Postmodernism' (Rosen, 1987, p. 8).

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Chapter 31

Feminisms and Art Theory

Marsha Meskimmon

> I think that the term 'transdisciplinary' is a rather adequate one in describing the new rhizomatic mode in feminism. It means going in between different discursive fields, passing through diverse spheres of intellectual discourse. The feminist theoretician today can only be 'in transit', moving on, passing through, creating connections where things were previously disconnected or seemed unrelated, where there seemed to be 'nothing to see'.[1]

Rosi Braidotti's description of the 'transdisciplinary' action of feminism, delineated above with particular reference to her concept of 'nomadic subjectivity', makes a useful starting point for a discussion of feminist art theory. Conceived in the plural, feminisms are an interweaving of sociopolitical, intellectual and material strategies which challenge and change iniquitous power relations founded upon normalizing sex and gender roles. In this way, feminists question the structures which make the relationship between sex (the configuration of the body as either 'male' or 'female') and gender (the social interactions which define the continuum from 'masculinity' to 'femininity') seem natural, eternal and fixed. Feminists insist instead that the nexus of sex, gender and sexuality are only conceivable as cultural constructs through which power between individuals is managed and maintained; 'woman' has been defined in opposition to 'man' so that the structural logic of patriarchal systems would appear commonplace, not because they were or are so.

Because of its wide-ranging critique, there is no single academic discipline which 'contains' feminist thinking and none which have remained unquestioned in the wake of so-called second-wave feminist scholarship over the past three decades. Feminist theories are more a way of thinking than a kind of 'content'; the transdisciplinary model described above is precise in its formulation, stressing the development of feminist theorizing as 'in process' and multiple. This further implies a particular relationship to the history of ideas and the use of sources. Sandra Harding encapsulated this relationship well in her critique of fixed analytic categories in the sciences: 'We [feminist thinkers] need to learn

how to see our theorizing projects as illuminating "riffing" between and over the beats of patriarchal theories, rather than as rewriting the tune of any particular one'.[2]

Making transdisciplinary connections, or 'riffing', stresses the agency of the feminist theorist as a part of her project; feminisms are not truths which have come from beyond or outside patriarchal histories, they are counterhegemonic practices from within. Conceived in this way, feminisms do not seek to find a 'new' language or an ideal theory ('untainted' by contact with 'phallogocentric' discourses), but instead focus on the ways in which the texts, objects, images and ideas which surround and interpellate us as subjects might be reworked towards different ends. In relation to critical theory and philosophical thought, such strategies have powerful ramifications, emphasizing that no idea stands outside the material and historical actions through which it was produced and that no concept is sacrosanct. Working along these lines, feminist scholarship moves easily in and between bodies of thought, stressing their corporeal origins and their ability to reconfigure with other concepts with differing effects.

There is obviously much to be said about the activity of reconfiguration and the nature of the collectivities described above. For the sake of brevity, it will suffice here to make three particular points about feminist thinking and its interaction with histories and conventional discourses. First, despite its eclecticism, feminist scholarship is neither lacking rigour nor merely substituting a form of radical relativism for static and unified truths. Feminist critiques of the canonical works and ideas of the Western tradition – from philosophy, literature and art, to science, politics and technology – have provided incisive and enduring reconceptions of knowledge for more than a century. Moreover, the ethical commitment of feminist scholarship to rethinking the past and changing the future has provided a sound basis from which to challenge the 'anything goes' attitudes formulated in some self-styled 'Postmodernisms'. For example, feminisms were crucial in countering moves towards the complete dissolution of the subject, the apolitical, dematerialized readings of 'texts' and the occlusion of agency in oversimplified accounts of the death of the author.

Secondly, while the exploration of theory itself as a material mode of historical practice may decentre its power as a universal norm against which all else can be judged, it has the positive value of enabling the effaced diversity within the centre to emerge. As themselves part of the interaction between histories and subjects, hegemonic discourses are significantly more complex and multifaceted than they seem at first glance and their heterogeneity opens them to any number of productive revisions. As a very simple example, feminist 'riffing' both exposes the myth of masculinity and enables multiple masculinities to be voiced. The productive interaction which can occur between the centre and its margins characterizes the final point I wish to raise about transdisciplinary feminisms and the history of ideas. Feminist scholars do not shrink from engaging with the terms and concepts of conventional 'theory' when and where these may be brought into productive and resonant configurations with other materials – when they can

enable us to 'see' what had appeared to be invisible and are themselves open to question and renegotiation. Thus, at present, much feminist theory operates with an arsenal of ideas and terminology recognizable as 'Poststructuralist' and with categories common to many different disciplinary areas. Yet it would be mistaken to assume that feminisms are unthinkable without these concepts or to explore the feminist uses of these tools as merely reiterating their origin point. Feminist strategic interventions work with the materials to hand in whatever context they arise. Feminisms are constrained by their material and discursive positions within histories, but they are not contained by them.

In art theory, feminisms have proven remarkably flexible, able to respond quickly to changes in both intellectual and material conditions, making innovative connections between ideas, objects and images. At best, this asserts fluidity as a way of thinking, writing and making, enabling diversity to be voiced rather than effaced. However, trying to grapple with the extensive intellectual scope of feminist art theory while attending to its internal debates can pose difficulties to a newcomer in the field. There is no easy way to understand feminisms without participating in their dialogues and exploring the themes and issues that they raise. This process asks the reader to reconsider many commonly held assumptions about both art and gendered discourse, contemplating a range of feminist theoretical strategies without fixing these to a monolithic position.

If feminisms continually transform themselves by making connections across disciplines, they also encourage the redefinition of academic and professional specialisms. In the arts, feminist theories have played a crucial role in dismantling traditional hierarchies between artists, theorists, critics, historians, curators, dealers and patrons. In practical terms, these hierarchies maintained masculine institutional privilege and changing their structures encouraged women's increased participation in visual culture. Feminists, especially in the years following the Second World War, had nothing to lose in challenging the professional structures of art by proposing new (frequently collectivist) forms of curating exhibitions, running galleries and making work. Nor were there so many well-represented women art historians and critics that they could not gain by establishing innovative journals, publishing houses and alternative theoretical motifs.

Despite some recent gains within mainstream academic circles, feminisms continue to dispute the very concept of fixed and static parameters, operating at the interstices of professional, political and theoretical demarcations. To critique marginalization, feminisms rethink the boundaries between the centre and its peripheries, delineating paradigms which operate differently. This activity has enabled feminist art praxis to develop in unique and striking ways, moving beyond the binary logic which opposes theory and practice, text and image and even subject and object, reformulating visual pleasure and multisensorial aesthetics as modes of knowledge. While these innovatory strategies will be discussed at greater length later in this essay, it is important to note at this stage that the dissolution of conventional professional boundaries in feminist art theory can again confound readers new to the field. For instance, is Adrian Piper

an artist, a philosopher or an art theorist? Is Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger a psychoanalyst or a practitioner? Is the work of Susan Hiller anthropology or art? Are Faith Ringgold's quilted pieces art or craft? An intellectual engagement with feminism and an aesthetics of radical difference transcends both disciplinary and professional specialisms as traditionally formulated and renders the questions raised above redundant. Indeed, such has been the case since the 1970s when second-generation feminist criticism first approached the art establishment.

Histories: Orthodox or Heterodox?

The histories you construct say as much about yourself as they do about the past. In overviews of feminist art interventions of the 1970s and 1980s, it has been common to develop a certain type of 'survey' which describes broad trends, unifies subtle variations and charts a linear narrative of the period, focusing upon a few well-known writers and artists as paradigmatic of feminisms as a whole. While this approach has proven useful in enabling those new to the field to grasp quickly some of the general themes of feminist art theory and so to move on to more sophisticated critiques, it has also exacerbated false oppositions, imposed rigid internal hierarchies and marginalized many innovative practices. At a more complex level, such surveys of feminist theory replicate masculinist conventions of history by subordinating multistranded networks of ideas to universal narratives of 'progress'. These models presuppose both an 'objective' position from which one views 'history' (and can define its 'truths') and a set of binary organizing structures which efface difference. In this way, they reproduce the logic of marginality itself.

In feminist art theory, this model defined the field mainly through reference to a limited set of Anglo-American texts and practices, themselves implied to be in opposition. That is, feminist theorists of the 1970s from the United States (with some variation between East and West Coast being noted), such as Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris, were seen to reinforce a tradition of liberalism which 'added' the names of women to the existing art historical canon without attempting to redefine the discipline itself. Similarly, US critics and practitioners of the period, such as Lucy Lippard and Judy Chicago, were constructed as 'antitheoretical' and/or 'essentialist' in that they maintained an interest in a 'feminine/ist aesthetic' and pictured the body of woman in their art. This reading was only made possible by grouping together disparate practices centred on the body (from performance work to 'central core' imagery) under a reductive conception of 'essentialism' as straightforward biological determinism.

By contrast, British scholarship, principally defined by the work of Griselda Pollock, was characterized as moving through Marxism to poststructural, continental theory in a bid to challenge art history itself as one of the discourses underpinning patriarchal hierarchies. The sense in which 'theory' was being invoked in this polarity between American and British scholarship tended to lean

heavily on textual practices – semiotics, discourse analysis, psychoanalysis (read through Lacan's linguistic reworking of Freud) and, of course, Deconstruction. Practitioners such as Mary Kelly were used to complete this picture with her work being described as 'scripto-visual' and concerned with the 'construction' of female subjectivity rather than its 'essence', depicted mimetically in the image.

All of the figures named above, the debates which their work inspired and the Anglo-American trajectories in feminist art history and practice more generally, are significant and well known. However, reductive readings do their work a grave injustice even as they marginalize material produced outside this limited paradigm. Additionally, the conventional reading of the Anglo-American axis pits feminist 'theory' against 'practice' in a way which is highly unproductive while at the same time implying that it is possible to find a perfect and universally applicable feminist representational strategy or theoretical method – a formula for the ideal feminist work. This has fostered a great deal of derivative critical praxis in which certain theories are simply taken as 'truth' and 'applied' to works of art, or particular representational strategies are replicated again and again with little reference to the specificities of their production or consumption. As I will suggest later in this essay, feminist strategies in aesthetics are not so much determined by an explicit content, but precisely by their ability to make critical interventions within localized fora.

Elizabeth Grosz countered the attempt to define an ideal feminist textual theory or practice with an alternative formulation:

> no text can be classified once and for all as wholly feminist or wholly patriarchal. . . . These various contingencies dictate that at best a text is feminist or patriarchal only provisionally, only momentarily, only in some but not in all its possible readings, and in some but not all of its possible effects.[3]

Grosz suggested that the 'feminist' appellation resides neither in the object nor in the subject who comes to theorize it, but in the process which takes place between these. This suggests that the dialogue between theory and practice can make connections across seemingly disparate spheres of knowledge. The histories of 1970s and 1980s feminist art theory look very different when approached from this perspective. Rather than find in them antagonistic orthodoxies seeking universal status, we can explore their variations as positive and productive, marking specific interventions in particular contexts. This form of dialogic encounter rethinks the Anglo-American axis of feminist art theory as well as introducing the specificity of geographical situation, class, race and sexual preference to the debate. Differences between women signify in such an approach and add voices to the feminist polylogue.

Acknowledging the differences between women as an explicit methodological concern underpins much of the most innovative contemporary feminist scholarship, including work in aesthetics, art history, criticism and practice. Examining the work from the 1970s and 1980s in this light, the conflict between centre

and periphery dissolves and more fruitful dialogues with diversity become apparent. Even the 'mainstream' was more multiple than the usual overdetermined readings imply: the 1976 catalogue to the exhibition *Women Artists 1550–1950* by Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris is a case in point. While this volume did have a white, Eurocentric bias and tended to explore the work of the women practitioners *in relation to* a masculine tradition which itself went all but unquestioned, it is often forgotten that what it documented was an exhibition. As an exhibition, it secured visibility for women in a major, public event and provided documentation which countered commonplace clichés about women's historical absence. As a strategy of its time and place it was both powerful and particular, weaving the newest trends in women's history together with the institutional practices of art in the public sphere. Similarly, the introductory essay to *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (1982), edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, disputed the assumption that US feminist art history was merely additive, arguing that their collection was meant precisely to question the parameters of the discipline itself. Significantly, the essays were written mainly in the 1970s, yet their thematic and theoretical breadth belies their absorption into a model of liberal American 'antitheory'.

British feminist interventions into art history were equally diverse; they no more delineated a singular theoretical line than they accepted the divisions between academic writing and practical action. For example, Lynda Nead's essay 'Feminism, art history and cultural politics', published in 1986, already argued against the reduction of feminisms to a monolithic term: 'Art history cannot accommodate the notion of feminism as a complex set of political ideologies; it therefore redefines feminism as a unified position which can be adopted by art historians in an unproblematic manner.'[4] Similarly, the work of Griselda Pollock, often taken to have defined a poststructural orthodoxy for feminist art historians and practitioners, is open to more multiple and interactive readings. It is sometimes overlooked that both *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981) and *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970–85* (1987) were produced collaboratively with Roszika Parker and that Pollock has made insistent appeals to feminist art practice for theoretical sustenance. These two features of her work are striking, politically informed manoeuvres against conventional art historical scholarship and part of a feminist transdisciplinarity. In what is probably her best-known early essay on feminist art history, 'Feminist interventions in the history of art: an introduction' (reprinted in *Vision and Difference*, 1988, pp. 1–17), Pollock delineated a theoretical genealogy from Marxism to 'discourse analysis' (via Foucault) and psychoanalysis (mainly Lacanian) which was used by later scholars to define a fairly unified and static body of 'feminist' art theory. However, in Pollock's essay, this trajectory was argued to be 'a contribution to a diversified and heterogeneous range of practices which constitute the feminist intervention in art's history', (ibid., p. 15). Moreover, the essay reminds readers that much work remains to be done in relation to class and racial difference and again asserts the importance of feminist art practice. The writing itself did

not necessitate the emergence of an orthodox methodology and if one subsequently appeared, it did so by reading the work through the lens of conventional metanarrative.

What is perhaps more notable about 1970s and 1980s feminist art theory is that much work was produced beyond the Anglo-American axis yet was overshadowed by its dominance. Not only did the centrality of the United States and Great Britain in the better-known mainstream sources collapse regional differences within 'America' (i.e. making the United States and Canada homogeneous while almost completely obscuring Central and South America) and 'Europe' (British feminist art theory standing in for the whole continental intellectual tradition), it rendered non-Western practices all but invisible. This is clearly an inadequate approach to the diversity of this work in both theoretical and practical terms. For example, feminist art theory in Germany worked within a long-established institutional context of women's art organizations and archives to develop a very different perspective on the historical force of women in the arts, the significance of women's genealogies and what 'feminist aesthetics' might be. The excellent collaborative projects such as the exhibition *Das Verborgene Museum* (1987) with its accompanying scholarly volumes and burgeoning archival resource is just one example of this. The German perspectives on feminist art history, theory and practice from the period were not simply a mirror of their British counterparts; they operated within a particular scholarly and aesthetic tradition which emphasized the documentation of women's presence in the arts as a continuous history of 'women's culture' within central Europe.

Feminist art theory and practice from the 1970s and 1980s in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand provides a telling case study of the limitations of the Anglo-American paradigm. Feminist art history, criticism and practice in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand demonstrates a clear familiarity with the writing and art practices of the Anglo-American tradition. However, in both Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, feminist scholarship and practice in the arts was influenced simultaneously by Anglo-American work and by close connections with Asia and indigenous Aboriginal or Maori culture. So, for example, collaborative art practices, exhibitions and publications between women from both the indigenous and settler communities were not uncommon and had significant historical precedents as well as political overtones. Unlike the situation in US scholarship at this time, in which differences of 'racial' or 'ethnic' origin often divided women one from another in their feminisms, Australasian feminist praxis frequently signalled the intertwining of colonialism and patriarchy as the dual terms of women's oppression. These cross-cultural links imbue the whole women's movement in Australia and New Zealand with a distinctive perspective on place, identity, time and difference and the feminist scholarship being produced there cannot be understood simply in relation to an Anglo-American tradition, despite its linguistic associations.

If the dominance of Anglo-American feminist art theory tended to obscure the diverse interventions made by feminist artists and critics in the rest of the

world, the preponderance of middle-class, white, heterosexual viewpoints in mainstream anglophone feminism often excluded working-class, ethnic minority and lesbian perspectives from within. Mobilizing the differences between women as a significant theoretical tool, postcolonial and lesbian scholars particularly critiqued the emergence of a monolithic feminist theory which falsely rendered women as a homogeneous unit. This criticism is especially powerful since it not only provides ways of thinking about those designated as on or beyond the borders of cultural power, it also explodes the myth of unitary 'racial' categories and normative constructions of sexuality for subjects who seem to be situated well within the 'centre'. In this way, it opens up heterogeneity and difference as conceptual modes applicable to thinking subjectivity generally and not as 'special pleading' for the marginalized. This reconception of the centre implies a reconfiguration of disciplines and genres as well, since these are premised upon normative conventions of the subject as unified and able to be articulated as 'universal'. Thus postcolonial and lesbian feminist praxis often worked multiply – combining scholarly texts with poetry, film-making, performance and other art practices. For example, the conjunction between location, gender and identity were voiced in the theoretical writing and film-making of Trinh T. Minh-Ha which explored Amerasian culture, while African-American women artists and theorists formulated models of practice which aligned them with mainstream feminisms while asserting the specificity of their perspectives as black women – a perspective which Jacqueline Fonvielle-Bontemps called 'Afrofemcentrism'.

Ntozake Shange, for example, was using performance art as a strategy to bring the particularity of young, African-American women's experience to body and voice as early as 1975 when *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* first toured in the United States. There are many fascinating features of *for colored girls*, but in the present context two are most pertinent. First, Shange 'dedicated' the choreopoem to 'our mothers, from Isis to Marie Laurencin, Zora Neale Hurston to Käthe Kollwitz, Anna May Wong to Calamity Jane' (1990, p. xii). This brief female genealogy reminds us how important a knowledge of women's historical presence has been to contemporary women practitioners seeking their own voice and that Shange's 'lineage' was diverse – mythic, historical, black, white, visual artists, writers, performers. Second, Shange used poetry and performance together to question the separation of mind from body and the ways in which languages, spoken, drawn and gestured, could be refashioned to articulate difference. This speaks eloquently of the interweaving of bodies and voices within feminist praxis; strategies which have emerged only during the 1990s in much mainstream feminist theory.

Similarly within the British art world of the 1980s, a collective black women's art movement founded upon the recognition of differences between women emerged. *Passion*, published in 1990, documented the movement and displayed its innovatory, decentralizing politics. The volume was edited by Maud Sulter and consists of a number of different yet interconnected strands by artist/theorists such as Lubaina Himid, Ingrid Pollard and Sutapa Biswas. Scholarly texts,

poetry, photo-essays, documentary images and press releases all find a place within the volume as part of a multilayered mode of enunciation. These strands reinforce the most determined political point of the movement, namely that 'black' women in Britain are a heterogeneous group comprising women, for example, of African, Caribbean and/or Asian origins, coming from various religious traditions and multiple class and regional affiliations. The diverse artistic and theoretical voices of black British women artists were accommodated in the movement by an explicit politics of difference.

The powerful critiques of 'colour-blind' feminist theory by diasporan women established heterogeneity and difference as key conceptual categories and new ways of thinking about a Western feminist project. So too have lesbian feminisms and so-called 'queer theory' countered any tendency to encapsulate a singular feminist orthodoxy in the literature. The lesbian contribution to the history of women's culture, from literature to politics, performance and the visual arts, is extraordinary. The emergence, for example, of a lesbian underground in Europe during the interwar years enabled women artists, writers and performers to experiment with alternative models of woman-centred practice and to develop novel modes of female spectatorial pleasure. These spoke differently from within – engaging with fashion and mass media forms without simply repeating their obvious messages of misogyny or presuming that women were passive, unwitting consumers in the face of popular culture. In recent years, lesbian scholars, poets and artists have sought to reconfigure pleasure, desire and erotics in ways which move beyond their situation within dominant heterosexual conventions. In the work of Audre Lorde for instance, the erotic is recast as a political location in which selves and others can meet without being assimilated into one through force. Judith Butler's well-known development of the concept of 'performativity' emphasized the importance of reiterative acts of agency in both the making and the un-making of fixed gender and sexual categories – again reconceiving the 'centre' as much as the 'margins'.

Subjectivity, Embodiment and Pleasure

The current state-of-play in feminist art theories enhances the role of radical difference and continues to be markedly transdisciplinary, moving easily between feminist philosophy, science, social theory and criticism in an international frame. Two key areas of this work have proven to be crucial in feminist art theory and practices: the concept of embodied subjectivity and the revision of histories through feminist aesthetics. By the end of the 1980s, the body had become a staple of feminist art theory and practice, which explored it as a contentious site between the personal and the political, the interior psychology of an individual and the social demarcations of the 'body politic'. Yet there seemed a residual tension in these concepts of the body between 'essentialism', defined as a form of biological determinism, and 'constructionism', that form of poststructural

thinking about the body which privileged social coding. This residual tension, a seeming opposition between 'nature' and 'culture', was derived from the conventional logic of Western mind–body dualism where pairs of opposing, but necessarily interlocked, terms define hierarchical relations within the world.

The problem inherent in this epistemological structure is the hierarchy of mind *over* body, with its concomitant logic of self *over* other, where the normative self is defined as masculine (and Western, middle-class, heterosexual, etc.). This 'logic of the same' makes it theoretically impossible to speak through difference and renders the articulation of female subjectivity in its own terms untenable. Structurally connected to 'body' and base 'matter', 'woman' cannot be voiced within this framework except as a term of difference through which the centre is reinstated. Women are homogenized to 'woman' and their agency is negated. For feminist philosophy therefore, the potential to think difference *differently* was imperative.

Similarly for feminist critics and theorists, dualist thinking again signalled a stalemate when faced with the sophisticated work being produced by feminist artists during the early years of the 1990s. With many still locked in debates about the 'correct' mode through which to image the body (or, indeed, whether it should ever be imaged again), practitioners as diverse as Helen Chadwick, Jana Sterbak and Orlan were exploring the extraordinary liminal spaces between attraction and repulsion, interior and exterior, the strange and the familiar, bodies and machines, thereby demonstrating just how inadequate binary logic was for the female body which perpetually exceeded the boundaries of its systemic objectification. The multiplicity of these practical interventions prefigured the dissolution of concepts of the body as an object in feminist art theory and enabled the development of process-based feminist aesthetics located around embodiment. As the 1994 catalogue to the first New Zealand biennial of contemporary art, *Art Now*, implied through its structural matrix 'body/site/material/sign', transdisciplinary reconceptions of the body were needed to keep pace with practice.

Current feminist art theory remains engaged with the body, but works with embodied subjectivity to explore alternative conceptions of women's agency, develops situated knowledges to reconfigure pleasurable, feminist aesthetics and examines its own critical premises through concepts of corporeal theory. All of these encounters with the body are dialogic and 'in transit' rather than fixed or deterministic. New approaches to 'the body' help us to rethink the past histories of women's art practices as much as to produce critical work on contemporary art. Rosemary Betterton's pivotal monograph *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body* (1996) confirms this. Moving through a range of historical periods, Betterton was able to make differences between women signify by locating their practices as *women* artists within specific times, places and contexts. Conceiving female subjectivity as embodied yet multiple permits just this kind of manoeuvre, simultaneously emphasizing the significance of the material, sexed body and its mediation in and through discourse. Thus, subjects are always

both mind and body, the biological material given shape, substance and meaning through particular intersubjective encounters with others. One of the most fascinating features of Betterton's methodology is the ease with which it can move across multiple formations of 'the body' in women's art, from images of the female nude to abstract paintings and installation pieces which evoke the body through trace, gesture and memory. In this way, theory becomes a mutable part of the process of interpretation rather than a fixed viewpoint from which to judge objects.

Rethinking the bodily roots of subjectivity also placed the articulation of female 'selves' onto the agenda in both theoretical and practical areas. Within conventional dualist logic, representations of female 'self-hood' or identity can only reiterate the power of the centre and their own marginality. By transcending that limiting paradigm, it becomes possible to explore the variety and fluidity of female subjectivity without falsely unifying it. In my own work, these ideas were particularly pertinent to women's self-portraiture. Women artists have used their own bodies and the structures of the 'self-portrait' for centuries without merely replicating the patterns of their own subordination and the task of the historian is to find ways with which to speak with these practices. The mimetic masquerades of Della Grace, the fragmented framing of Lee Martin and the shift from figuration to material installation in the 'self-portraits' of Sonya Boyce are neither able to be reduced to a singular narrative of 'woman' nor dispersed as disconnected diversity. Each of these strategies has a particular resonance within the debates around female subjectivity. As embodied articulations of 'the self', they locate power and vision strategically to voice alterity without trying to reinscribe a unified centre.

Embodiment refutes the concept of the body as a mute object or base matter and locates the subject within a body reconceived as a mobile network of processes. This implies a subject who is situated, materially and discursively, within particular constructions of, for example, sex, 'race' and class. The 'self' is formed through intersubjective encounters within this network and any configuration of knowledge is similarly contingent and located. Situated knowledge, the particular and perspectival cognition of embodied, enworlded subjects, is critical to much feminist theory including the work of Donna Haraway which has critiqued universalizing, disembodied truth claims in scientific discourse. The concept of situated knowledge has important ramifications for contemporary feminist art theories since it emphasizes both the importance of aesthetic knowledge (perception through the senses) and the location of the 'knower' within the 'known'. Rather than replicate the dominating logic of rational, objective 'word' over sensual, deceptive 'matter', situated knowledges stress the multiple forms of perception and cognition which constitute ideas and partake in the production of 'theory'.

Exploring the relationship between 'seeing' and 'knowing' has an important part to play in art criticism and theory. Traditional conventions of sight have constructed it as disembodied, objectifying and mastering – as a masculine or

'male gaze'. While this 'male gaze' might describe the dominant viewing structures of mainstream cinema and canonical Western Fine Art, using it as a prescriptive model suggested a false hegemony of visual power and pleasure. Neither was masculine sexuality homogeneous and easily consonant with visual mastery nor were models of feminine/female spectatorship simply masochistic or devoid of pleasure. Critiques of monolithic concepts of 'the gaze' came from many perspectives which were mindful of the embodiment of the 'eye/I'. Lesbian artists such as Deborah Bright 'queered the gaze' to demonstrate the potential for alternative, pleasurable viewing both within mainstream imagery and beyond while Michelle Wallace countered the ubiquity of the 'male gaze' by calling to the experiential evidence of African-American women film-goers. Jane Campion's film, *The Piano* (1993), used the very methods of narrative cinema to explore feminine/ist visual pleasures, and recent scholarship on women in Modernism has revised conventional encodings of spectatorial pleasure centred upon the masculine *flâneur* to demonstrate the important roles women played within visual culture as both makers and consumers of imagery.

These interventions are but a few of the strategies being deployed by contemporary feminist art theorists and practitioners to reconceive pleasure, the erotic and the sensual basis of knowledge more generally. The traditional privilege of vision over the other senses as somehow more 'true' or 'objective' has been called into question through multisensorial installation practices. In the work of Cathy de Monchaux and Joan Brassil, for example, knowledge, spatio-temporal situation and pleasure interpellate subjects through calls to all of their senses, embodying the 'eye' and denying the pre-eminence of disembodied, rational thought.

That knowledges can be resited within bodily engagements between subjects and objects in the world predicates recent moves towards phenomenology, especially the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas, in feminist aesthetics. In phenomenological reconceptions, knower and known are of the same space and the theorist is located within the critical encounter as but one of its determining elements. Stressing the significance of critical agency within the space of the interpretative act relates particularly to calls within feminist critical scholarship to corporealize theory and make difference an operative category. Corporeal theory argues against universal, disembodied paradigms of thought which separate 'subjects' from the 'objects' they 'know'. The separation of 'pure' thought from action, articulation or location within the frame of the world places 'theory' above 'practice' and reiterates the binary logic of the same.

When the perspectives of the theorist form part of the project, implicit politics and tacit assumptions are made explicit and opened to critique. It thus becomes vital to explore the politics of the critic/theorist since intersubjective interpretation refutes the possibility of singular certitude and instates the potential for manifold readings of material. Unless the questions being asked, the methodologies deployed and the investments of the theorist are subject to scrutiny and critique, dangerous forays into radical relativism are invited. *Many*

histories do not imply *any* history; recent 'reconstructions' of the Holocaust as a fiction by right-wing extremists point to the necessity of critical vigilance in scholarship.

Therefore, corporeal theory, in relation to feminist art criticism and practice, reiterates thinking-in-making, stresses the contingency of 'theory' as a praxis and encourages a process of criticism to emerge between texts and images as well as between subjects and objects. Rather than seeing theory as an abstract truth to which practical objects are subjected, understanding theory as itself part of a critical process, responsive to material and able to be revised, locates both the critic and the work within a dialogic activity of meaning-making.

Corporeal theory and the reconception of the subject as embodied emphasize the possibility of signifying radical difference and using aesthetics, a fuller form of bodily cognition, to rework histories. Reconceiving histories is imperative to those seeking to explore the significant contribution of women to the arts, both historically and in the present. A wealth of material is now available on women artists and has informed a critique of the Western art historical canon as a mechanism by which the cultural contributions of, for example, women, people of colour and the working classes have been occluded. Recent work on women's art practices has moved away from additive surveys towards strategies emphasizing the articulation of alterity, the perspectival nature of histories of art and a reassessment of gender and sexual difference in visual culture.

Histories, Aesthetics and Radical Difference

Examining the operation of categories of 'woman' and 'art' in particular historical moments has enabled many scholars to demonstrate that women made distinctive and successful contributions to the visual culture of their times and that their work and careers as *women* artists force us to rethink the conventional narratives of art's histories. These approaches have informed work centred on many different national and temporal contexts and they neither homogenize the category of 'woman' in any particular period nor suggest that there is a universal 'woman's art'; their strength resides in their ability to describe the diversity of positions taken up by women making art. Thus, work on women artists of this calibre dismantles the universalizing power of the canon, enabling the specificity of alternative practices to be voiced.

Articulating differences between women (not just between women and men) plays an important part in contemporary feminist reconceptions of history since groups can only be made marginal when they are conceived as homogeneous 'others'. Asserting women's agency defeats the othering of 'woman' just as interventions by postcolonial subjects across various contexts refute the domination of a singular colonized 'subject'. Opposing hegemonic history through heterogeneity, however, does not replace the centre with 'new centres'. Rather, the structural imperative for a unified central narrative disappears and with it goes

the tendency to understand women's history *in relation to* a masculine norm. These insights account for a number of recent practices within feminist art history and theory, not least the sustained research into the multifaceted connections between 'race' and gender in visual culture and the development of cross-cultural scholarship on international women's art.

In her dialogue, 'Talking art with Carrie Mae Weems', bell hooks finished by saying 'We have to create a kind of critical culture where we can discuss the issue of blackness in ways that confront not only the legacy of subjugation but also radical traditions of resistance, as well as the newly invented self, the decolonized subject' (1995, quotation from pp. 74–93; p. 93). Both hooks's theory and Weems's practice are informed by the knowledge that differential operations of colonial power have interpellated heterogeneous subjects. Moreover, their dialogue stresses that theory and practice are not oppositional modes through which to negotiate novel forms of subjectivity, but rather that aesthetics more broadly defined is a critical location for political praxis. Similarly, Gen Doy's materialist approach to 'race' and visual culture (in both nineteenth-century French and contemporary British contexts) demonstrates the complexity of colonial and postcolonial power arrangements and the ways that these impacted upon individuals differently. This work problematizes easy concepts of 'race' by exploring the ways in which national, socioeconomic, political and visual cultures operated to secure definitions of racial difference only provisionally and when these had immediate material effect. The myth of universal or homogeneous 'racial' difference was produced through historical mechanisms, themselves perpetually unstable.

The imperative to reconceive one-dimensional models of colonialism is nowhere more marked than in work on Arab women artists. The dynamic interrelationship between 'colonizers' and 'colonized', and the concomitant interweaving of European and Arabic aesthetics in contemporary women's practice, confounds simplistic models which stress imperialist hegemony. The narratives of colonial intervention in the Arab world are themselves highly variable; that many different European countries were involved in colonial interactions with a diverse population across a vast region makes it impossible to speak of any one 'colonial' or 'postcolonial' Arab culture. This multiplicity has been exacerbated by the twentieth-century cultural politics of the region so that, for example, Lebanon forged close connections with European artistic and intellectual circles while the rise of Muslim fundamentalism in places like Iran severed links with the West. The work of Arab women artists, many of whom are decidedly international in their making and exhibition practices, negotiate with these diverse strands of influence, particularly exploring the interrelationship between figuration and calligraphy in understanding place, power and gender.

There is clearly no single approach to this complex set of practices which would yield a final 'definition' of their meaning. Instead, the critic is asked to attend to the specificity of the work, taking each instance as the performance of the subject at that moment rather than an indication of some underlying essence. This is akin to the reconception of the subject through 'performativity'. Rather

than seeking a core identity underpinning the actions of an individual and making those uniform in their meaning, performativity emphasizes the activities and articulations as agency itself, constantly in flux and able to change in contact with other identities/subjects. It would be a mistake to think that this renders identity or subjectivity as a void. Instead, it returns us to the statement made by Rosi Braidotti at the start of this essay describing the rhizomatic, transdisciplinary action of feminism, able to make productive connections across ideas without being frozen into one position.

In feminist art theory, this way of thinking and working reiterates the importance of the materiality of artworks and the embodied aesthetic knowledges they produce. It enables critics to engage with the specificity of differences between women in and through their work rather than seeking to homogenize their practices or their identities as 'woman'. This can have a number of particular ramifications. For example, in the fascinating exhibition and catalogue *Inside the Visible* (curated and edited by Catherine de Zegher), the international art practices of women in the twentieth century provided a forum through which to look at the histories of the period differently, 'elliptically'. This neither elided the works into 'one' nor ignored the specificity of women's cultural agency as *women*, negotiating manifold factors of location. It further emphasized that theory itself (and the position of the theorist) are subject to negotiation in dialogue with material practices and that diversity cannot be explicated by metanarrative.

If different questions are asked of women's art, feminist aesthetics and histories in contemporary theory, so too are different forms of feminist critical texts being developed. The nine-volume catalogue set from Kassel, *Echolot: oder 9 Fragen an die Peripherie* (1998) and the innovative volume from the same year, *A Fruitful Incoherence: Dialogues with Artists on Internationalism*, produced by INIVA (Institute of International Visual Arts), are cases in point. *A Fruitful Incoherence* uses a strategy of productive encounters with dissonance as processes through which meanings may be made by the activity of the reader/viewer. *Echolot* is a beautiful object in itself and its material form encourages its theoretical insights to be practised by its readers. It operates as 'questions' (*Fragen*) and manifold answers. The set suggests connections since each catalogue came from a show in the series, explored the work of one woman artist and followed a variable but recognizable 'house style' in production. Yet the work and the catalogues are also very different and permit the reader, physically and theoretically, to move between and across ideas and volumes to form a host of possible connections. This set of books is both feminist art theory and art practice and places sensual reading at the core of new ideas. Similarly, the on-line (and now hard-copy) feminist art journal, *n.paradoxa*, encourages an engagement with the diversity of international women's art practices and theoretical interventions. The fact that it was developed through 'new media' is part of its strategy. Linking feminist aesthetics, linguistics and visuality with new media, *n.paradoxa* recognizes the potential of technologies to be used by feminist artists in the production of alternative meanings. This is not some futuristic utopian strategy however; 'new

media' have neither 'positive' nor 'negative' connotations in and of themselves and instead must be adopted and adapted by women for their own purposes. The activity of the encounter is crucial.

Scholarship within feminist philosophy and art theory which moved beyond the dualist logic of 'positive/negative' or mind/body enabled reconceptions of subjectivity, agency and history to emerge. These paradigms do not efface or marginalize difference in favour of orthodox truths, exclusive canonical value-judgements or singular narratives of historical agency. Feminist theory is instead about pleasure, collectivity and convergence, about meanings produced through processes between subjects and dialogues which sustain diversity. Feminist art theory, as a mode of praxis which brings together material and thought, embodiment and knowledge, can speak eloquently to the wider projects of feminist scholarship. In fact, the aesthetician Hilde Hein has claimed that: 'Feminist aesthetics may well be the prologue of feminist theory understood more broadly'.[5] Inasmuch as feminist art theory enacts the transdisciplinary movement between ideas, objects and images, creating resonances and making new connections, she may very well be right.

Notes

1 R. Braidotti (1994) 'Toward a new nomadism: Feminist Deleuzian tracks; or, Metaphysics and metabolism', in C. V. Boundas and D. Olkowski, (eds), *Gilles Deleuze and the Theater of Philosophy* (pp. 159–85), Routledge, p. 177.
2 S. Harding (1992) 'The instability of the analytical categories of feminist theory', in H. Crowley and S. Himmelweit, (eds), *Knowing Women: Feminism and Knowledge* (pp. 338–54), Polity Press, p. 341.
3 E. Grosz (1996) 'Refiguring lesbian desire', in *Space, Time and Perversion* (pp. 173–85), Routledge, p. 175.
4 L. Nead (1986). 'Feminism, art history and cultural politics', in A. L. Rees and F. Borzello, (eds), *The New Art History* (pp. 120–24), London, Camden Arts Ltd, p. 122.
5 H. Hein (1995) 'The role of feminist aesthetics in feminist theory', in P. Zeglin Brand and C. Korsmeyer, (eds), *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics* (pp. 446–63), Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 449.

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Chapter 32

Psycho-Phallus (Qu'est-ce que c'est?)

Mignon Nixon

Louise Bourgeois, wearing a tufted coat of monkey fur, grins broadly, a smile reported again and again in the widening crinkles of her face (plate 32.1). Under her right arm she clasps a two-foot-long latex phallus, her 1968 sculpture *Fillette* (meaning "little girl"; plate 32.2). As her fingers firmly grasp the tip, behind her elbow nestle the big, shiny balls. The coarse skin of the tip pushes through the V-shaped opening of a sleeve fitted over the shaft, the ridges formed by its raised seam mimicking the veins that run across Bourgeois's flexed hand below. Staged in 1982, the year of Bourgeois's first retrospective exhibition, at the Museum of Modern Art, the photographic session with Robert Mapplethorpe was intended to produce a portrait for the show's catalogue. The picture that was actually used as the catalogue's frontispiece, however, was a cropped version of the now-famous portrait, reduced to a head shot. This excision of *Fillette* from the photograph, displacing the grin from its gag, spoiled the joke, but its effect was not only to refashion Bourgeois's artistic persona through the substitution of a more enigmatic smile. Another consequence of this cropping was to cancel an object lesson through which the artist, in collaboration with Mapplethorpe, effectively demonstrated the logic of her sculptural production.

By the term *logic*, I mean how Bourgeois's sculpture works. In the Mapplethorpe picture, taken to commemorate the occasion on which Bourgeois's work of four decades was to be assembled for the first time, the artist designated *Fillette* to encapsulate that logic. What, then, do this object, and this photograph, show about how Bourgeois's sculpture works?

It works against abstraction. The most striking characteristic of *Fillette* is its literalness. Yet, as Rosalind Krauss observed in 1989, nowhere in the literature on this work is "the expectation of an encounter with abstract sculpture made to admit that it is face to face with the reality of organs" (Krauss, 1999, p. 55). Writing in 1969, the year after *Fillette* was made, William Rubin, for example, criticized the explicitness of some of Bourgeois's sculptures: "When themes of sexuality are pressed too literally," he cautioned, "a set of emotions interposes itself between the viewer and the work in a manner unconducive to aesthetic



Plate 32.1 Robert Mapplethorpe, photograph of Louise Bourgeois. Louise Bourgeois 1982, © The Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe/A+C Anthology

contemplation" (Rubin, 1969, p. 20). He was restating a central tenet of Modernist sculpture: that, as Albert Elsen observed in his canonical account, "the elimination of the distinguishing features of bodily parts" is a procedure essential to sculptural abstraction (Elsen, 1974, p. 41).

Fillette runs directly counter to the synecdochical logic of much Modernist sculpture, as outlined by Elsen, in which the bodily fragment, distilled to an abstract form, stands symbolically for the body as a whole. For Elsen, Constantin Brancusi's sculpture is an emblematic case. Brancusi, Elsen argues, supersedes Auguste Rodin's use of anatomical fragments (which Elsen calls "stumps and traces of amputation") by contracting the body to a single essential form (Elsen, 1974, p. 76). What this reading of Brancusi misses, in Krauss's assess-



Plate 32.2 Louise Bourgeois, *Fillette*, 1968, latex over plaster, 59.7 × 28 × 19.1 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of the Artist in memory of Alfred H. Barr Jr. Photograph © The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © Louise Bourgeois/VAGA, New York/DACS, London 2002

ment, is "the organ-logic" of such works as *Torso of a Young Man* (1916) or *Princess X* (1916) – the latter, like *Fillette*, humorously marked by an exaggeratedly feminine name. For these sculptures are not so much phallic as genital, equating the phallus not with a generalized bodily wholeness, but with sexual organs.

In her portrait with *Fillette*, Bourgeois appears to resist, if not deride, a history of modern sculpture that would see *all* reductions of the body in terms of a dis-

tillation to pure form. For if abstraction refines the body to its most fundamental forms, *Fillette* seems to work on the counterprinciple of reducing the body to its essential parts: to those fragments which are the objects of sexual and psychic fixation. One implication of Bourgeois's decision to be photographed with *Fillette* for the MOMA catalogue therefore was to contest the Museum's construction, through its permanent displays, of the history of modern sculpture as preeminently a history of abstraction. Confronting the viewer in the present tense of the performative, she wielded *Fillette* against the imperative of Modernist history as a genealogy of abstract styles.

Read as an intervention in Modernist history, Bourgeois's pose seems to make the following claim: that, even at its most aesthetically radical, sculptural abstraction regulates itself to the patriarchal order through its consummate sublimation of bodily form. In Freud's definition, sublimation is the process by which instincts are diverted from sexual aims to nonsexual and culturally esteemed ones, and especially to artistic and intellectual endeavors (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973, p. 431). At the level of form, sublimation transposes sexual expression into aesthetic expression. The naked body, for example, becomes the nude, and skin the smooth, cool surface of marble.[1] *Fillette* resists sublimating the penis, both in its explicit shape and in its scabrous, mottled texture (in contrast to the gleaming finish of a work like Brancusi's *Princess X*). In its corruption of form and surface, *Fillette* therefore counters the clean abstract whole, and is positioned instead as *a part* – one which is, crucially, subject to play.

It reworks the fetish. "You can carry it around like a baby, have it as a doll," Bourgeois suggests, as one way of employing *Fillette* (Lippard, 1976, p. 243). Tucked under the artist's arm, *Fillette* functions as a prop, a phantasmatic object the artist "carries around" to demonstrate how her sculpture works. This gesture poses, tongue-in-cheek, the question of how *Fillette* is to be considered in psychoanalytic terms.

Fillette's relation to Freudian psychoanalytic discourse is historically mediated by Surrealism. As an art student in Paris in the 1930s, Bourgeois traveled in Surrealist circles. This contact was renewed in New York, where Bourgeois moved permanently in 1938, and where key figures in the Surrealist movement soon emigrated following the German occupation of Paris in the Second World War. Bourgeois's relation to the Surrealist avant-garde was, however, both personally and structurally ambivalent. From the mid-1940s, she began to conceive her work as a "rebuttal"[2] to the preoccupations of an older generation of male artists she described as "lordly and pontifical."[3] The critique of Modernist abstraction that was to emerge in Bourgeois's work was, therefore, not simply an extension of the one Surrealism itself had earlier produced, but a critical reworking of Surrealism's own terms.

If the logic of Modernist sculptural abstraction can broadly be described as sublimatory – stripping the body of its "distinguishing features" so as to enhance its form – much Surrealist production might conversely be thought of as desublimatory, attempting to show the body as it might be experienced at the level of

the unconscious. One technique of desublimation used in Surrealist objects in particular is to undermine the aesthetic autonomy of the work of art by recasting it as an object of psychic use. Like chance, the concept of psychic use is strategic, a means to revive awareness of the powerful unconscious investments in objects that the convention of aesthetic autonomy represses. When Bourgeois clasps *Fillette* under her arm she invokes this Surrealist tradition, demonstrating that the sculpture can work like a prop or doll. Even as installed for exhibition, it does not stand on a pedestal, relegated to a discrete viewing space, but hangs from a hook, as if to imply that it can be detached from its hook and handled.

Writing in the MOMA catalogue, curator Deborah Wye proclaimed "an urge to rock this scandalous object [that] is almost irresistible," highlighting the work's baby-like size (Wye, 1982, p. 27). As Mapplethorpe's contact sheets show, Bourgeois herself adopted such a pose as an alternate to the toting gesture, displaying the work's infantile features.[4] Indeed, supported from its underside, cradled against her hip or snuggled to the breast, *Fillette* suddenly looks very much like a baby.

This physical manipulation of *Fillette* in relation to Bourgeois's body, as she alternately pins it under her elbow and rocks it in her arms, articulates not only the work's connection to a Surrealist culture of objects made for psychic use, but also a critique. For both poses burlesque the phallocentric terms in which Surrealist art represents the psychic, taking particular aim at the fetish.

By Freud's account, the fetish is a phallic substitute with a dual function: it commemorates the loss of the maternal phallus (the penis the child once believed the mother to possess), and it disavows that same loss. The fetish therefore doubles as a memorial to castration (the fate the mother's penis is imagined to have suffered) and a protection against it. For to mourn the loss of the maternal penis is also to express an anxiety lest that threat be extended to the child himself. Thus, in Freud's account, fetishism is by definition a masculine perversion: a penis fixation formed in relation to a castration anxiety from which the female subject, lacking a penis, is understood to be exempted. By making the fetish the instrument of its attack on the sublimatory aesthetics of Modernism, Bourgeois seems to suggest, Surrealism perpetuates the bodily regimes of patriarchal culture, albeit substituting perversion (the fetish) for sublimation (the nude, the phallus). Her performance with *Fillette* flouts this Surrealist reading of fetishism, suggesting that a more playful reading of Freud might reveal more radical possibilities.

Here it may be useful to compare *Fillette* with a specific Surrealist work. In Surrealist practice, a sculpture is often designated an *object*, and set on a shelf or table, or directly on the floor, rather than being displayed on a pedestal or base. An example is Alberto Giacometti's *Disagreeable Object* (1931), a wooden phallus fitted with finger grooves and spiked at its tip. Displayed resting on its side, the work is posed as an *object of* the viewer's body, something to hold or handle. At once a toothed club repelling touch and a grooved hand prop offering itself to be rocked, it is a contradictory object, combining aggression and vulnerability

(Brenson, 1974, pp. 117–18). Taken as a fetish, it incorporates the threat of castration and a defense against it. *Fillette* recapitulates key features of *Disagreeable Object*. Both objects are displayed without bases, suggesting that they can be used as props. In both, a structural ambivalence is expressed as the play between two positions, cradling and brandishing. And as manipulable phallic props, both invoke the fetish. Yet Bourgeois's poses, in keeping with her reference to carrying *Fillette* around like a baby, recast the fetish as an object of feminine as much as masculine fantasy. Her performance broaches the possibility of a productive misreading – or perversion – of Freudian fetishism.

This misreading is generated by comparing two terms that are supposed to be incompatible in Freudian terms: namely, fetishistic perversion and normative femininity. In Freud's account, femininity is achieved through the maternal role. The woman accepts a baby as a substitute for the penis she lacks. The equivalence penis=baby therefore secures for the woman, in the role of mother, a place within the phallocentric economy of desire. *Fillette*'s doubling as penis and baby caricatures this equation to great comic effect, pointing to a structural congruity between normative femininity and fetishism. For like the fetish, which provides the fetishist with a substitute for the maternal penis, the baby, in Freud's account, similarly serves the mother as a substitute penis. This unlikely correspondence between femininity and fetishism has been noted by feminist theorist Rachel Bowlby, who puts the case succinctly: "the baby-wish simply takes the place of the penis-wish: it is the substitute and it is also what hides its continuing existence" (Bowlby, 1989, p. 50).

Bourgeois's performance plays this chain of displacements as farce, imputing to the scenarios of fetishism and femininity an almost slapstick improbability. Feminine sexuality under patriarchy, her poses suggest, is necessarily contrived – as contrived as the sexual rituals of the fetishist. Bourgeois's parody is, however, more than a send-up of Freudian theory: it enters deeply into that theory's own logic. For side-by-side with his essay on fetishism, and written in the same month of August 1927, is Freud's essay on humour. There Freud postulates that the function of humour is as a defense against anxiety (like fetishism, which defends against castration anxiety), and that this defense involves a strategic splitting of the ego (also like fetishism, which splits the subject between knowing and not knowing). Humour, Freud observes, is a strategy asserting the pleasure principle against reality. Trauma is displaced by pleasure, dispatched by the ego's insistence that "traumas are no more than occasions for it [the ego] to gain pleasure" (Freud, "Humour," 1927, p. 162). By converting trauma into pleasure, the subject achieves a sort of mastery over anxiety, a nonpathological denial whose effects Freud describes as rebellious, liberating, and elevating.

Bourgeois's play with fetishism and maternity elicits laughter in relation to two notoriously humorless practices. At least for the fetishist himself, who both suffers and derives pleasure by inflating his loss to tragic proportions, the fetishistic scenario is deadly serious. And the mother's role, in its conventional patriarchal form, is so voided of aggression as to be flatly passive. Twinning

them, Bourgeois makes the comparison between fetishism and maternity an excuse for pleasure. This parodic gesture also demonstrates how the Surrealist recourse to perversion can be turned to a feminist purpose, compounding fetishistic perversion with perverse femininity – and so opening up new possibilities of resistance to patriarchy from a feminine subject position.

In 1982, Bourgeois was seventy years old. Clasping the outsized phallus beneath her arm, cracking a smile for the viewer and for Mapplethorpe – playing up the reference to his famously explicit photographs of male bodies – she enacted a triumphant eroticism choreographed to confound assumptions about how a "woman artist" of her age might look, or act, or choose to represent herself to history.[5] Her pose also displayed the phallus as a mock attribute, in a travesty of masculinity as phallic posturing. Asserting the prerogative of critique in the very moment of institutional recognition, it elicited from the Museum a disproportionate anxiety. One explanation for this anxiety might be that Bourgeois's gesture made her work volatile in political as well as aesthetic terms.

It works as a part-object. The question remains: is Bourgeois's object lesson strictly a parody, a humorous interrogation of the patriarchal construction of gender or tongue-in-cheek reply to that infamous Freudian question, "What do women want?" Or does this object lesson encompass a proposition, too?

Strung up on a hook, *Fillette* is both an object of anxiety and a triumphed-over object of aggression. Clasped under the elbow, it is claimed for a subversive desire and pleasure. Rocked in the arms, it receives a solicitous care. Pinned there, it is gripped in a punishing embrace. Attaching to graphic phallicism a feminine name, its title cross-genders it. Conflating the masculine fetish with the "little one" of feminine desire in the Freudian schema, its phallic form incorporates infantile features. In all, *Fillette* seems to operate as a kind of multipurpose phantasmatic object in the form of a sculpture. Its closest analogue, at least in psychoanalytic discourse, might be the part-object.

The part-object is a body part that is the object of a drive. Freud observed that infantile instincts are directed not toward whole persons (such as the mother), but toward parts of the body (particularly the breast) and emanations of the body (such as milk, urine, and feces). Even beyond the Oedipal crisis of "object choice," the sexual instincts can, Freud noted, remain fixated on a body part. Fetishism is an example of such a fixation, in which the subject remains attached to the maternal penis. The term *part-object* itself however belongs to the object-relations theory of Melanie Klein (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973, p. 301). Building on the work of Karl Abraham, Klein revised Freudian theory to develop a model of psychoanalysis in which infantile, or pre-Oedipal, experience was interpreted not as preliminary but as primary.

For Klein, the infantile is not a phase that precedes the Oedipal history of the subject, but a level of experience that subtends the entire experience of the subject. Beginning in the 1920s, Klein pioneered a clinical practice she termed the psychoanalytic play technique, adapting Freud's principle of free association of words to children's fantasy play. Grounded in prelinguistic (or in Freudian

terms pre-Oedipal) experience, Kleinian theory emphasizes the formative role of the infantile drives. Constructing her model of subjectivity around the infant, and so in relation to an immediate and fragmented bodily experience unmediated by language, Klein analyzes the restless interplay of states – or to use her term, positions – that arise from the drives.

The infant, Klein posits, "has sadistic impulses directed, not only against the mother's breast, but also against the inside of her body: scooping it out, devouring its contents, destroying it by every means which sadism can suggest" (Klein, 1986, p. 116). Part-objects are the focal points of this infantile world, where the body is not yet differentiated into male and female – is not sexed – but is splintered into parts. In the infant's rudimentary understanding of the body, the part-object is the first object of attachment and frustration, triggering fantasies of incorporation (of the good feeding breast, for example) and of destruction (of the bad frustrating one). Klein however also claims that the part-object persists at the level of fantasy in adults, that it is never fully superseded by whole objects (or persons). Fragmentary bodily experience is, in this model, the ground of subjectivity itself, the psyche being, in Klein's description, forever riven by the drives.

To describe *Fillette* in terms of the part-object is to underscore its difference from the fetish, but also from the phallus. It is to align it, therefore, with one revision of Freudian theory, and against another: with Melanie Klein's object-relations theory of the infantile drives, developed in the period from the 1920s to the 1950s, and against Jacques Lacan's theory of the phallus as "signifier of desire," which came to exert a powerful effect on feminist art practice in the 1970s and 1980s. The crucial distinction is that the phallus belongs to a symbolic register (the register of language), while the part-object operates sub-symbolically, as a target of a drive.

In Freudian theory, the crucible of sexual identity is the Oedipus complex. Equally for the girl and the boy, identity is defined in relation to the penis: by the possession or lack of one. It is, however, in Jacques Lacan's revision of Freudian theory that the term *phallus* becomes pivotal, Freud himself having used the term relatively seldom (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973, p. 312). For Lacan, the phallus is not the penis, not an organ per se, but a signifier. Within patriarchy, which Lacan calls "the law of the father," the phallus therefore is a linguistic concept, a master signifier. The phallus does not belong to either sex, or to any individual, but to language itself. (Yet, as feminist theorist Jane Gallop has noted, the Lacanian distinction between penis-as-organ and phallus-as-signifier is extremely difficult to maintain *in practice*, for these two terms are synonyms: *phallus* "*also* always refers to *penis*," Gallop, 1988, p. 126). If Lacan's is the revision of Freud that privileges the phallus and the symbolic order of language, Klein's is the one that disprivileges it in favor of the part-object and the prelinguistic drives. Assigning no greater significance to the penis than to any one of a multiplicity of part-objects (including breast, mouth, milk, urine, feces,

baby, vagina, belly), Klein is concerned to map a primitive infantile level of experience. Her contention is that the drives, and the fantasies generated through them, survive infancy, exerting a perpetual pressure on the subject.

To refocus the problem, then, in terms not of psychoanalytic debates and revisions of Freud, but of artistic developments and revisions of Modernism, Annette Michelson has observed: "There is a dominant trend toward [the] representation of a body-in-pieces, of what is in Kleinian theory termed the part object, that runs, like an insistent thread, a sustained subtext, through much of American artistic production in the decades of the 1950s and '60s" (Michelson, 1991, p. 48). The immediate context of this trend was the hyperbolic masculinity of postwar American art. The heroic individualism attributed to New York School gestural painting in particular was a target of artistic practices as diverse as those of Bourgeois, Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns, Yayoi Kusama, and Eva Hesse. These artists countered the masculine excesses of gestural painting with the part-object. One obvious implication of this recourse to the infantile was to parody the expressive gesture, to contest its inflated rhetoric by comparing it to the affective intensity of the baby. A more fundamental move in the work Michelson has called "art objects as part objects" however was to *embrace* the infantile, or pregendered, register of experience as a position from which to attack the rigid gender hierarchies of the Cold War era.

A standard reading of this trend in postwar art has been as a return to Surrealism, restaging Surrealism's two-pronged attack on bourgeois social conventions and the aestheticism of an earlier Modernism. Johns's *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955), for example, employing casts of body parts ranged in shuttered boxes, has been interpreted as a revival of the fetish: countering phallic wholeness with fragmentation, integration with psychic splitting, and aesthetic autonomy with a contingent use-value. Yet, as with *Fillette*, this return to Surrealism entails a critical reworking, giving expression to an emergent gender politics via the part-object.

Bourgeois's "rebuttal" to Surrealism was, from its beginnings in the mid-1940s, grounded in a protofeminist critique both of the movement's sexism, and of its failure to read psychoanalytic discourse aggressively, so as to produce more "revolutionary" (to borrow a term from Surrealism's own manifestos) representations of the body. By the mid-1950s, when Johns exhibited *Target with Plaster Casts* in his first solo show, the Surrealist fetish had receded to a historical reference. Critics described Johns's work as Neo-Dada, invoking the iconoclastic spirit of an earlier twentieth-century avant-garde against the social and aesthetic complacency of late Modernism. *Target with Plaster Casts* was considered for purchase by the Museum of Modern Art, but ultimately rejected (in favor of other works from the same show) because the cast of a penis in one of the boxes was deemed potentially offensive to viewers. Anticipating the episode in which, a quarter of a century later, the Mapplethorpe photograph of Bourgeois's phallus-toting pose would be cropped for publication, the rejection of

Target with Plaster Casts signaled the potentially disruptive effect of the phallus-as-penis, as literal desublimated body part.

"Art objects as part-objects" (rather than fetish objects) further erode the symbolic effect of the work of art through their emphasis on "distinguishing features of bodily parts." Even more, the implicit gender politics of the part-object, which invokes the psychosexual and psychosocial experience of the body, militates against the museum's exclusive claim on the work. As Bourgeois demonstrates in her poses with *Fillette*, the part-object lends itself to a kind of phantasmatic play that is not strictly limited to viewing. A playful relation to the object edges the work from a space of viewing toward a bodily domain of touch. (And if this encounter with the object is no longer exclusively an exercise in abstract thinking, neither is it reductive in intellectual terms merely because it evokes infantile experience: as Klein demonstrates through her psychoanalytic play technique, the world of the drives is itself absorbingly complex.)

"Art objects as part-objects" did not simply reproduce Surrealism's model of the unconscious, but reworked it in relation to a postwar social and discursive field. The part-object emerged as a logic of artistic production in the period of the 1950s and 1960s, before the advent of the feminist and gay liberation movements. In the 1970s, Bourgeois would take an active part in feminist politics both within and outside the art world. Her pose with *Fillette* alludes to the pivotal role she then played in connecting the radicalism of feminist politics to earlier avant-garde movements, and to Surrealism in particular. The Mapplethorpe picture wryly documents the survival of the part-object as a politically resistant term in Postmodernism.[6]

It does theoretical work. What makes *Fillette* so provocative is its great repertoire of potential meanings, of which perhaps the most arresting is its challenge to the phallocentrism of cultural production itself. As such, it is a work that poses fundamental theoretical questions. It asks, for example, if the part-object might help to unlock a cultural fixation on the phallus by moving down to the drives (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973, pp. 309–11). And it asks if representing the phallus as both phallic *and* castrated might help undo the opposition between phallic masculinity and castrated femininity that defines phallocentrism (Gallop, 1988, p. 127).

I hope to have shown that *Fillette* exceeds art criticism's dominant paradigm for expressing the relation between art and theory: namely, that the work of art demonstrates or applies a theoretical principle. With respect to psychoanalytic theory, with which I have been concerned here, art history has tended to disregard the status of psychoanalysis as a discourse, and instead has too often been determined to find in it a set of interpretative keys. That art intervenes in theoretical discourse – that art theorizes – is still too seldom recognized. This, as I have tried to show, is one of the achievements of *Fillette*: to pressure, critique, and revise pivotal claims of psychoanalytic theory, especially as those claims bear upon women and men as gendered subjects.

Notes

1 On the imperfect clarity in Freud's writings as to the distinction between sublimation and idealization, see Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973, pp. 431–3.
2 Bourgeois used this term in an interview by the author, September 27, 1996.
3 P. Gardner (1994) *Louise Bourgeois*, Universe, p. 26.
4 The full set of Mapplethorpe's contact sheets from this session are reproduced in M. Nixon (1991) "Pretty as a picture: Louise Bourgeois and/as *Fillette*," *Parkett* 27, March, 52–3.
5 On the problems posed by this term, see Linda Nochlin's classic essay (1971), "Why have there been no great women artists?", in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*, Harper and Row, 1988, pp. 145–78.
6 On the survival of the part-object from the dissident Modernism of Duchamp to feminist Postmodernism, see my "Posing the phallus" (2000).

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PART FOUR

Interpretation and the Institution of Art

Chapter 33

The Rules of Representation

John Willats

A number of art historians and psychologists have suggested classification schemes for describing the spatial systems in pictures. Probably the best known is that due to Heinrich Wölfflin (1932), who described the representational systems in European paintings of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in terms of five pairs of categories: linear and painterly, plane and recession, closed and open form, multiplicity and unity, and clearness and unclearness. Wölfflin's scheme was intended to apply to artists' pictures in perspective, and this not only limits its formal scope but can have the effect of implying that pictures outside the Western realist tradition are defective or inferior. His scheme does, however, have the merit of attempting not only to describe the spatial relations between entities in the picture (plane or recession), but also the nature of the marks (linear or painterly) in which these entities are expressed. Other schemes such as those of White (1967) and Hagen (1986) have concentrated on describing what I shall call the *drawing systems* in pictures: systems that map spatial relations in the scene into corresponding spatial relations in the picture. Both these schemes include systems other than linear perspective, but neither is exhaustive; and neither scheme distinguishes among the various *denotation systems*: systems that map features of the scene into corresponding features on the picture surface. None of these schemes is, in consequence, capable of giving adequate formal descriptions of quite large classes of pictures: pictures such as Cubist paintings and Orthodox icons based on unfamiliar spatial systems.

The scheme I shall describe here (Willats, 1997) is based on the account of visual perception given by David Marr. Marr's theory of vision revolutionized the study of visual perception when it first appeared in the late 1970s and is still generally regarded as the most influential account of the human visual system. The question Marr asked was: 'How does one obtain constant perceptions in everyday life on the basis of continually changing sensations?' (Marr, 1982, p. 29). His answer was that the visual system takes the point sensations arising in the retina as the result of light coming from the scene (*viewer-centered descriptions* as Marr calls them) and uses them to compute three-dimensional shape

descriptions (*object-centered descriptions*) that are independent of any particular direction of view. These object-centered descriptions are then stored in long-term memory and compared with subsequent incoming descriptions, enabling us to recognize the same objects when we see them again under new lighting conditions or from a new point of view. Marr's account of vision is worked out in formidable detail, but for my purposes the most important of Marr's insights was that any system for representing shape and space (and this includes pictures as well as internal shape descriptions) must include at least two components.

The first component (the *drawing systems*) defines the way in which the units of which scenes and pictures are composed are related in space. For example, the shape of a table might be described in terms of the positions and orientations of a number of *edges* meeting at right angles, while a picture of a table in perspective might be described in terms of the directions of *lines*, some at right angles and some converging to a vanishing point. In systems other than perspective a table might be represented in some other way: in pictures in oblique projection, for example, a common system in Chinese and Japanese drawings and paintings, the lines representing edges in the third dimension in the scene do not converge to a vanishing point as they do in perspective, but run in parallel oblique lines across the picture.

The second component (the *denotation systems*) defines the nature of the units of which scenes and pictures are composed: Marr calls these the *primitives* of the system. In descriptions of scenes the primitives may be three-, two-, one- or zero-dimensional, and in pictures two-, one- or zero-dimensional. A description of a table might be built up of scene primitives in the form of points, or edges, or surfaces, or even whole volumes: as a 'slab' standing on four 'sticks', for example. Similarly, a *picture* of a table might be built up of picture primitives in the form of points (as in a Pointillist painting[1] or a newspaper photograph) or lines (as in a line drawing) or even whole regions (as in early geometric-period Greek vase painting).

The classification scheme I shall describe is thus formulated in terms of two mutually dependent components: the drawing systems and the denotation systems. In the first:

spatial relations in the scene	are mapped by the drawing systems into	spatial relations in the picture

In the second:

scene primitives (edges, points etc.)	are mapped by the denotation systems into	picture primitives (lines, dots etc.)

The various drawing and denotation systems are defined by the rules governing these transformations. As there are five main classes of drawing systems – perspective, oblique projection, orthogonal projection, inverted perspective and



Plate 33.1 Gebrand van den Eeckhout, *Abraham and Three Angels*, 1656, oil on canvas, 71 × 82 cm. St Petersburg, Hermitage Museum

topological transformations – and three main classes of denotation systems – optical denotation systems, line drawings and silhouettes – with numerous variants in each case, and as (with some exceptions) each drawing system can be combined with any denotation system, this gives quite a rich classification scheme.

It is important to bear in mind that both scene and picture primitives, and the relations between them, are not features of the world or pictures *per se* but are abstract constructs, dependent on the way the human visual system operates. In practice, scene primitives are used to describe the shapes of real or imaginary *objects*, while in pictures the primitives are actually realized in terms of physical *marks* such as blobs of ink or patches of paint.[2]

In order to illustrate this classification scheme I shall analyse the spatial systems in two paintings, depicting substantially the same subject matter but doing so in very different ways. I shall then try to say why using these different systems might be appropriate to the different social functions each picture was intended to serve.[3] The first painting analysed here (plate 33.1) is *Abraham and Three Angels* by Gebrand van den Eeckhout (1621–74). (Eeckhout was a friend

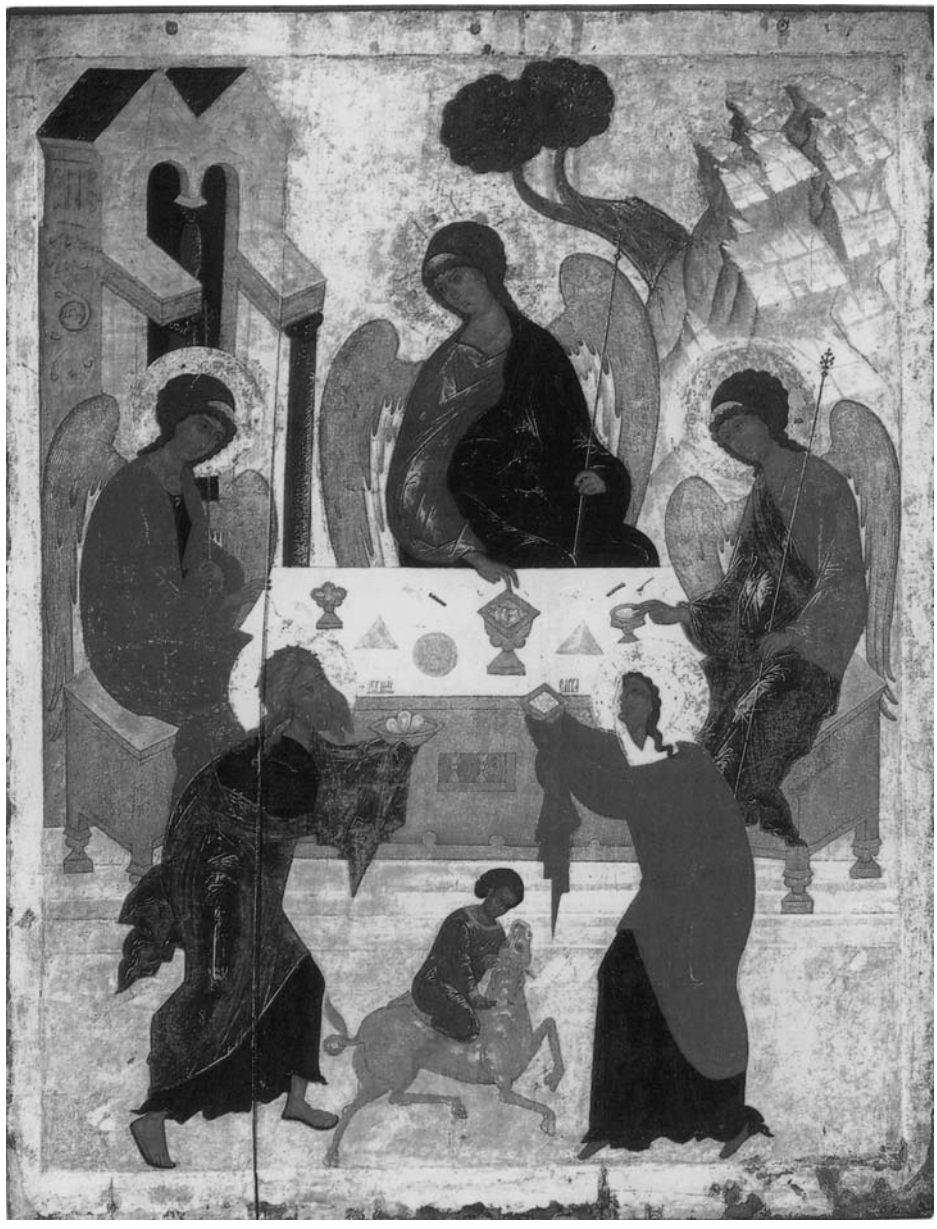


Plate 33.2 Unknown icon painter, *Holy Trinity*, Novgorod, mid-sixteenth century. Egg tempera on wooden panels of three boards with two struts, 147.2 × 113.3 cm. St Petersburg, Russian Museum

and pupil of Rembrandt and a successful and productive artist.) The second (plate 33.2) is the *Holy Trinity* and was painted in Novgorod in the mid-sixteenth century; as with many icon paintings the name of the artist is unknown. Both paintings depict the meeting between Abraham and the angels described in

Genesis 18: 1–6: three angels appear to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre and foretell the birth of his son Isaac. Abraham greets the angels, washes their feet, asks his wife Sarah to bake bread for them and orders a servant to kill and dress a calf. Both paintings tell the story through representations of the same set of people and objects, but whereas Eeckhout treated his subject as if it were an episode in history, the scene represented in the *Holy Trinity* has a special symbolic significance in Orthodox theology: the three angels are seen as representing (from left to right) the three Persons of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Abraham and Three Angels

Drawing systems

The drawing system employed in Eeckhout's painting is a very familiar one: straightforward linear perspective. This is established by the directions of the lines (orthogonals) representing the edges of the building on the left of the picture. When these lines are extended they meet at a vanishing point close to the right-hand edge of the picture, roughly coinciding with the head of a calf silhouetted against a lighter ground. This position for the vanishing point is probably intended to draw attention to the sacrificial calf and the figure of the servant, important features of the story that might otherwise remain unnoticed in the background of the painting. The horizon line and the viewer's station point are established by the position of this vanishing point, so that the scene as a whole is shown as if viewed from a station point well below the eye level of both Abraham and the angels. Apart from the directions of the orthogonals the other indicator of perspective in pictures is diminution of scale with distance: objects that are further away in the scene are shown to a smaller scale than objects that are closer to the viewer. This is clearly true of Eeckhout's painting. Moreover, this diminution of scale with distance is carried out consistently, so that the position of Abraham's head is proportionally higher in relation to the horizon line than that of the servant girl because he is closer to the viewer. The surface geometry of this and similar paintings in perspective may be produced using the kinds of rules described by Alberti in Book One (Spencer, 1996): rules about the orthogonals converging to a vanishing point, for example. These rules are related to the three-dimensional geometry of light passing through space to the eye of a viewer, and if followed correctly they result in a two-dimensional pictorial geometry corresponding to that which would be produced by the intersection of light rays with a plane surface.

Denotation systems

The denotation system in Eeckhout's painting is one in which the picture primitives are zero-dimensional, represented in practice by marks consisting of

touches of paint whose tones and colours are related to small cross-sections of the array of light from an imagined scene. Pictures in perspective based on a denotation system of this kind conform (to a greater or lesser extent) to Brook Taylor's famous definition of a 'Picture drawn in the utmost Degree of Perfection' in which 'the Rays of Light ought to come from the several Parts of the Picture to the Spectator's Eye, with all the same circumstances of Direction, Strength of Light and Shadow, and Colour, as they would do from the corresponding Parts of the Real Objects' (Taylor, 1719, pp. 1, 2). The attempt to produce such pictures has a long history in Western art; Eeckhout's *Abraham and Three Angels* clearly belongs to this tradition, and a number of the pictorial devices in Eeckhout's painting can be related to the effects of light falling on or reflected from a real scene. In photography these effects are produced mechanically, but in painting they can be simulated by the employment of rules directed towards producing what psychologists call the various depth cues: these include atmospheric perspective, tonal modelling and cast shadow. For example, one such rule is described by Leonardo: 'Make the first building above the said wall of its own colour; the next most distant make less outlined and more blue; that which you wish to show at yet another distance, make bluer yet again; and that which is five times more distant make five times more blue. This rule ensures that when buildings appear of equal size above a line, it will be clearly discerned which is more distant and larger than the other' (Kemp, 1989, pp. 80, 81).

Atmospheric perspective has four components: diminution of clarity of form with distance, diminution of tonal contrast with distance, change of hue with distance and diminution of saturation with distance. It is by no means the case that all these components are always employed together even in quite realistic pictures, but in Eeckhout's painting all four are present, although in a fairly muted way. The details of the tree in the foreground and the objects on the table are drawn more sharply than those of the buildings and the tree in the background. The tonal contrasts in the foreground – those within and between the cloak and the tunic of the central angel, for example – are more extreme than any between objects in the background. The warm hues of Abraham's cloak, the window shutter behind him and the under-tablecloth all contrast with the cool violet of the clouds and the cool greens of the trees in the background. And finally, the reds of Abraham's tunic are much more saturated than the red of the edge of the roof in the background and the workman's trousers on the extreme right. All these components of atmospheric perspective combine to give a quiet but highly convincing sense of three-dimensional depth.

Tonal modelling in pictures corresponds to the depth cue known as shape from shading. As a matt surface in a scene turns away from a light source the light reflected from this surface to the spectator will become less intense, and the representation of this effect by tonal modelling provides the artist with a way of showing the shapes of surfaces. In the representation of Abraham's cloak Eeckhout appears to have used a system based on three main tones: surfaces facing an implied light source coming from behind and to the left of

the viewer are painted in the lightest tone, surfaces turned away are painted in a darker tone and surfaces turned still further away are painted in a still darker tone.

Like tonal modelling, the representation of cast shadow can also be used to show the shapes of objects, and the two devices very often appear together. Here, the outline of the shadow cast by the left foot of the central angel in Eeckhout's painting is attached to the foot itself at the toes, but not at the heel; and there is a small patch of unshadowed surface under the instep. This shows that the foot is resting on a horizontal surface but that the heel is raised: a simple but surprisingly effective device. The rule here seems to be that if a point on a represented surface in a picture coincides with a point on the shadow representing that point, the two points represented must be in contact in the scene (Waltz, 1975; Willats, 1997). In addition, as Gombrich (1995) has pointed out, cast shadows can tell us a good deal about the lighting conditions represented in a picture. Most of the cast shadows represented in Eeckhout's painting have blurred outlines, consistent with a diffused light coming from the overcast sky represented in the background. The shadows associated with the central angel, however, are relatively sharp, as if this figure were illuminated with a spotlight, or a sudden gleam of light from the sun. By such means, Eeckhout conjures up a highly circumstantial account of what it would have been like to have been present when the angels appeared to Abraham at a particular point in space at a particular moment in time.

The Holy Trinity

Drawing systems

The drawing and denotation rules employed in *Abraham and Three Angels* are both related to the projection of light through space, but these are not the only rules that can be used as a basis for pictures. Pictures can also be based on *topological* geometry: in this system only the most basic spatial relations such as touching, proximity and enclosure are preserved. Many of Paul Klee's paintings and drawings after 1937, for example, are based on topological rather than projective transformations.[4] In another class of transformations the normal (optical) rules are reversed. In linear perspective the rule is that the orthogonals converge to a vanishing point and objects in the background of the scene are shown to a smaller scale compared with objects that are nearer to the viewer, but in *inverted* or *divergent perspective* this rule is reversed: the orthogonals *diverge*, and objects further from the viewer are shown to a larger scale compared with objects in the foreground. Inverted perspective is the most commonly employed drawing system in icon painting, and the Novgorod *Holy Trinity* provides a good example, but it also contains examples of various other drawing systems.

Whereas Eeckhout's *Abraham and Three Angels* is based on one single drawing system (perspective) the Novgorod *Holy Trinity* employs different systems for

different objects, so that the spatial system of the picture as a whole is inconsistent. The seats on which the two angels to the left and right are sitting approximate, very roughly, to isometric projections. In true versions of this system the lines representing edges in the second and third dimensions run in parallel oblique lines to the right and left. Here, however, the lines representing the bottom edges of the legs of the seats are horizontal, while the tops of the seats are shown in plan. Moreover, the lines representing the horizontal edges of the tops of the seats diverge from the central axis of the painting, giving an effect of inverted perspective. This is repeated in the directions of the edges of the brackets jutting out from the building on the left, and the small portion of the right-hand edge of the table just visible behind Sarah's halo. The roofs of the building on the left, in contrast, are in a system known as horizontal oblique projection in which the orthogonals are horizontal: another common system in icon paintings. In addition, the recess in the centre of the front of the table is in oblique projection, and the central Eucharistic chalice is in a modified version of axonometric projection. (In axonometric projection a plan view of the top of an object is added to a front view: a common system in Cubist paintings.)

This inconsistency is repeated in the treatment of the representation of change of scale with distance. The central angel in the painting symbolizing God the Son is represented to a larger scale than the angels to either side even though this figure is the furthest away, while the smallest figure is that of the servant in the foreground, reinforcing the impression of inverted perspective. Again, however, this scheme is not carried out consistently: the building on the left, the oaks of Mamre and the mountain are all in the background of the scene but are shown to a smaller scale. The *Holy Trinity* may thus be described as being in an inconsistent mixture of drawing systems of which the most dominant is inverted perspective.

Denotation systems

Whereas *Abraham and Three Angels* is based on a denotation system in which points denote picture primitives, the *Holy Trinity* is based on a combination of line drawing and silhouette. In pure silhouettes the picture primitives are two-dimensional *regions*, and in this system it is the shapes of the picture primitives as a whole (rather than the shapes of their boundaries) that are important. Few artists' pictures are based on pure silhouettes: Greek vase paintings of the early geometric period and some of Matisse's *gouaches découpées*[5] provide exceptional examples. The main problem with using pure silhouette is that it can be difficult to show the occlusion or partial occlusion of one object by another. The way in which the leg of the servant overlaps the calf, for example, could not be shown if both objects were painted the same colour, and there were no internal lines. This is important because the representation of occlusion is the most powerful of all the depth cues. In the *Holy Trinity* this problem is solved partly by using different colours for different objects, and partly by using lines to depict

internal details such as the folds of the drapery. Even so, the representation of occlusion is much more limited in the *Holy Trinity* than it is in *Abraham and Three Angels*; compare the overlap of the figures of the two left-hand angels in Eeckhout's painting with the relative separation of the figures in the *Holy Trinity*.

To the basic denotation system of silhouette with line drawing are added a number of unusual or anomalous pictorial devices. Lines in pictures can denote a number of different kinds of scene primitives, of which the most important are *edges*, such as the edges of rectangular objects, and *contours*, such as the contours of smooth forms like drapery and the human figure. A number of writers have shown that in both these cases there are strict rules governing the shapes and configurations of lines in line drawings if they are to depict possible objects. One of these rules (Huffman, 1971) governs the way in which lines denoting contours must come together at line junctions; another (Koenderink and van Doorn, 1982) shows that where a line depicting a contour ends the line depicting the contour must be concave to the occluding surface. If these rules are followed correctly line drawings can give a vivid impression of three-dimensional shape. In the *Holy Trinity* both these rules are violated: the lines do not always come together correctly at the line junctions (as in the area of drapery just below the neckline of the central angel), and the shapes of the lines at the end-junctions (where the lines depicting contours end within the form) are either straight or (as in the folds of drapery over the leg of the central angel) convex rather than concave. As a result the representation of drapery locally often looks relatively flat.

Another anomaly concerns the direction of tonal contrast. It is generally acknowledged that photographic positives look much more 'natural' than their corresponding negatives, even though the information they contain is the same in each case. Pearson, Hanna and Martinez (1990) pointed out a related but rather more subtle effect: line drawings in black on a white ground generally look more natural than similar drawings carried out in white on a black ground. Pearson et al. provide evidence that suggests that this is not just a matter of familiarity, but arises from a specific design feature in the early stages of the human visual system. Presumably this is why most line drawings are carried out using black lines on a white ground. In the *Holy Trinity*, however, as in many icon paintings, some of the lines depicting the folds of the drapery are carried out in a light tone on a darker ground. Some of these lines are in a brilliant white, and others in a light ochre (perhaps originally gold). In other places, such as the tunic of the central angel, the lines are painted in the more usual black on a lighter ground, but each line is bordered on one or both sides by an area of brilliant white on a darker background. Details of the edges of the table, the seats and the building, and the contours of the sacrificial calf, however, are depicted using dark lines on a lighter ground in the normal manner.

The *Holy Trinity* also contains numerous examples of another anomalous pictorial device related to the denotation systems known as 'false attachment'. In the perception of real scenes information about the depth of objects in space

relative to the position of the viewer is given by the depth cue known as motion parallax. As the viewer moves to one side an object that is nearer to the viewer will appear to move across the field of vision at a faster rate than an object that is further away, and this tells the viewer that the two objects lie at different depths. This is not true of pictures, however. A step to one side does not resolve accidental alignments, and as a result the visual system makes the (unconscious) inference that these features are in fact touching in the scene. Instances of this occurrence in pictures are known as 'false attachments', and are as a rule avoided by painters working in the Western realist tradition unless they serve some special purpose, because their presence tends to destroy the illusion of depth. One instance does occur in Eeckhout's painting: the tips of the fingers of the central angel touch or nearly touch the edge of Abraham's tunic in the picture although they would be separated in depth in the scene. This may be purely accidental, or it may be that Eeckhout used this device deliberately in order to emphasize the relationship between Abraham and the central angel.

A special case of false attachment occurs when objects represented in a picture are falsely attached to the frame (or, in an icon painting, to the margin, which takes the place of the frame in Western painting). If an object in the real world seen through a window appears, accidentally, to touch the window frame, a step to one side will show that the object does in fact lie at a different depth. This resolution cannot occur in pictures, so again painters working in the realist tradition will normally avoid false attachments between objects in the picture and the frame. No such false attachments occur in Eeckhout's painting; on the contrary, all the objects are cut off by the frame, as they would be in a photograph. In the *Holy Trinity*, in contrast, there are numerous instances of the use of false attachments both within the picture and between objects in the picture and the frame. Within the picture, false attachments occur between Abraham's foot and the leg of the calf, the bread offered by Abraham and the bottom edge of the table top, the bottom of the chalice on the left and Abraham's halo, and the bottom of the chalice on the right and Sarah's halo. False attachments also occur between the margin and the edge of the building on the left, the tree, the mountain, the angels' wings on the left and right, one of Abraham's feet, one leg of the sacrificial calf and both of Sarah's feet.

Finally, a number of depth cues related to the play of light that make an important contribution to *Abraham and Three Angels* are simply not present in the *Holy Trinity*. None of the components of atmospheric perspective is present. Clarity of detail and intensity of tonal contrast are distributed equally across the picture, and although the strong red of Sarah's cloak appears in the foreground, this is balanced by the equally strong reds of the angels' tunics in the middle ground. There are no cast shadows, and the only tonal modelling in the picture appears in the heads of the figures, and as a way of identifying different planes within rectangular objects such as the seats and the building on the left.

Thus the denotation systems in the *Holy Trinity* are, like the drawing systems, both anomalous and highly inconsistent, and this has the effect of flattening the

picture surface and destroying much of the illusion of depth given by the representation of occlusion. Why is this so? Are the anomalies and inconsistencies in the *Holy Trinity* the result of carelessness or incompetence, or do they serve some purpose? I suggest that although these deviant constructions are anomalous when judged by the standards of Western realistic painting they are not simply 'mistakes' but serve specific functions within the context of icon painting. More generally, I shall argue that the different spatial systems used in *Abraham and Three Angels* and the *Holy Trinity* can be related to the different social and religious functions that these two pictures were intended to serve.

The increased realism in Italian painting during the fifteenth century can be ascribed, at least in part, to the requirements of Catholic (as distinct from Orthodox) theology. In the context of Catholic religious painting it was important that the faithful should not only be able to identify the various figures in pictures, but that these figures should be portrayed as realistically as possible (Baxandall, 1988). This end could best be served by an increase in perceptual realism in painting; and this in turn depended on artists mastering the optical depth cues. The subsequent demands of Protestantism, with its belief in the literal, historical truth of the Bible, could also be served by an emphasis on perceptual realism. By exploiting so many of the optical depth cues in his picture of the meeting between Abraham and the angels – that is, by combining linear perspective with a highly optical denotation system – Eeckhout, like a modern news photographer, was able to provide the viewer with what Gombrich (1960/1988, p. 115) called an 'eyewitness account'.

But the technical and social functions that the pictorial devices in the *Holy Trinity* were intended to serve were quite different. On a purely visual level the use of silhouette, characteristic of Russian icon painting, has an obvious practical value because it enables the objects depicted to be easily recognized even at a distance and in the dim lighting conditions common in Orthodox churches – just as motorway signs are based on silhouettes so that they can be seen at a distance, or in driving rain. Whereas Eeckhout's painting was intended to be seen from close to, in good light, and at eye level, the *Holy Trinity* would have been seen on the iconostasis at the far end of the church, by candlelight and often through a haze of incense.

The different areas of colour also serve a practical visual function because they clarify the shapes of the different regions. In addition, however, they have a symbolic significance, rather than serving the ends of atmospheric perspective as they do in Eeckhout's painting: the red garment of the angel on the left, for example, symbolizes God's sacrifice of his son (Shalina, 1994). Many of the other pictorial devices used in icon painting also have a symbolic significance. In Eeckhout's painting the angel's foot is shown firmly anchored to the earth by the use of cast shadow, but in icon paintings this device is not used: figures are shown apparently floating, free from their attachment to earthly time and space. More generally, there are no shadows in icon painting because 'The Divine Light permeates all things, so there is no source of light, which would illuminate

objects from one side or the other' (Ouspensky and Lossky, 1994, p. 40). Similarly, the reversal of the normal direction of tonal contrast in the line drawing within the figures has also been given a symbolic interpretation: light is represented as shining *out* of the figures, not on them. In addition, the numerous instances of false attachments between objects in the picture and the margin can be seen as a metaphor for the links between the material and spiritual worlds: whereas everything outside the margin belongs to the material world of space and time, everything within the margin belongs to the world of the spirit. 'The icon lies on the border between the material and the immaterial, between the visible and the invisible' (Averintsev, 1994, p. 11). Finally, the use of inverted perspective serves to emphasize the distinction between the world of the icon and the common everyday world. When we look at an icon, we are not looking through a window at another segment of our own world, subject to the same physical laws, as we are in Eeckhout's painting; we are looking at another *kind of* world.

However, the spatial systems employed in Eeckhout's painting and the Novgorod *Holy Trinity* are not just arbitrarily different in the way that natural languages are different. It is not just that the pictorial devices in the *Holy Trinity* are anomalous judged against the conventions of Western realistic painting, they are anomalous within the context of the transmission of light through space and the design features of the human visual system. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to know to what extent the spatial systems of paintings like the *Holy Trinity* would have seemed optically natural to Orthodox congregations in the way that Eeckhout's painting must have seemed natural to seventeenth-century viewers, and to what extent they were seen as paradoxical. But to the extent that they may have seemed paradoxical, even though familiar, the use of anomalous pictorial systems may have seemed appropriate. Icons are usually regarded as pictorial theology, and the language of the Bible, and especially the language of Christ himself, is often paradoxical. Indeed, the Orthodox theologian Timothy Ware (Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia) has argued that the language of theology is *necessarily* paradoxical, because it seeks: 'to express in human language that which lies far beyond all human comprehension. . . . We are compelled to employ antimony and paradox because we are stretching human language beyond its proper limits' (Ware, 1994, pp. 7, 8). In the light of this, the anomalous language of icon painting may well seem more appropriate to its subject matter than the sober language of perspective realism.

None of this, however, explains why so many of the anomalous pictorial devices in the *Holy Trinity* can also be found in many twentieth-century paintings: paintings whose function, on the face of it, is so very different from that of icon painting. Many Cubist paintings, for example, contain similar anomalous drawing and denotation systems.[6] Perhaps this similarity in the employment of anomalous spatial systems in pictures having such utterly different social functions can be explained in the following way. The most obvious effect that the employment of anomalous systems has is to draw attention to the picture as both

a physical object and as an artificial symbol system. When we look at a painting like Eeckhout's *Abraham and Three Angels* we tend to look through the painting at the depicted three-dimensional scene, rather than at the flat surface of the canvas; and the more convincing the depth cues, the better this is achieved. This effect served Eeckhout's purposes: he was trying to give us an eyewitness account. But although the social functions of an icon painting and a Cubist still life are so different they have this in common, that the spatial systems they employ are intended to draw attention, though for very different reasons, to the picture as both a physical object and a symbol system. The most fundamental function of an icon painting, according to Ware (1993), is to serve as a metaphor for the Incarnation: 'If flesh has become a vehicle of the Spirit, then so – though in a different way – can wood and paint' (p. 33). For this metaphor to work the spatial systems in icon painting must depict a spiritual world rather than an earthly one, but at the same time they must draw attention to the picture surface in order to emphasize the role of the icon as a real, physical object.[7] This can be best achieved by the use of anomalous spatial systems: systems that differ from those based on the rules of everyday physical optics.

Notes

1 Pointillist paintings and newspaper photographs are both based on points as picture primitives, rather than either lines or regions. There are, however, considerable differences between them in the ways in which their picture primitives are related to the corresponding scene primitives, and the ways in which their picture primitives are realized in marks (see note 2).

2 The distinction between marks and picture primitives is a crucial one, and is akin to that made in linguistics between phonemes (the underlying structural units of a language) and the actual physical sounds in which the phonemes are realized. As I understand it, Morelli's account of style is based more on the nature of the marks made by painters than on their representational significance.

3 Bryson (1991) gives a broadly functionalist account of art history, based on a semiological interpretation of pictures.

4 Klee's *Another Camel!*, 1939; *The Park at Abien – From the Vegetable Department*, 1939; *Little Baroque Basket*, 1939; *Naked on the Bed*, 1939; and *Oh, but oh!*, 1939 (analysed in Willats, 1997) are all based on topological rather than projective geometry. In these pictures the topological relations between contours in the scene are carefully preserved, but not their true shapes.

5 Matisse's *The Swimming Pool*, 1952; *Women and Monkeys*, 1952; and *Seated Blue Nude III*, 1952 are all based on pure silhouettes. See also Picasso's *Rites of Spring*, 1959 (analysed in Willats, 1997).

6 Juan Gris's *Breakfast*, 1914, is based on a mixture of inverted perspective and axonometric projection and there are numerous instances of false attachments both within the picture and between objects in the picture and the frame. In addition, the normal rules for atmospheric perspective and the representation of occlusion are both reversed (analysed in Willats, 1997). Similarly, Braque's *Still Life: The Table*, 1928,

is based on a mixture of inverted perspective, axonometric projection and orthographic projection, and the normal rules for the direction of tonal contrast (Gombrich, 1960/1988) and the representation of occlusion are both reversed.

7 Much of the considerable impact of the *Holy Trinity* as a physical object (which unfortunately cannot be appreciated in a reproduction) also derives from its size, the nature of its surface (warped wood panels) and the quality of its paintwork. The Cubists enhanced the physical impact of their paintings by including real objects such as woodgrain paper, or by adding sand to the paint to draw attention to its texture.

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Chapter 34

Gombrich and Psychology

Richard Woodfield

Gombrich's active involvement with the study of psychology makes him unique as an historian of art. It is true that there had been a tradition in Vienna of applying psychological insights to the study of *Kunstgeschichte* (Gombrich, 1984b) and that this approach had also been picked up elsewhere, for example by Wölfflin and Worringer. But the central difference between Gombrich and the other historians has been the degree to which he has been prepared to expose those psychological assumptions on which his work has been based. Gombrich was deeply aware and critical of Riegl's *Die Spätrömische Kunst-Industrie* (1901) and *Stilfragen* (1893); he admired the endeavours of Emanuel Löwy to give an account of the growth of Greek art and he was spurred by, yet critical of, Hans Sedlmayr's book *Die Architektur Borrominis* (1930). To develop his own understanding of the principles of psychology he attended the lectures of the psychologist and semiotician Karl Bühler and participated in his students' experiments. He worked closely with the Freudian analyst Ernst Kris, who had also been a pupil of Schlosser's in the Second Institute of Art History in Vienna. In his first published substantial encounter with psychology, the *Bodonyi Review* (Gombrich, 1935), he applied lessons he had learned both from Schlosser and from Bühler to the study of the use of the gold ground in late antique art, developing Schlosser's notion of *Kunstsprache*; he also criticized, *en passant*, Panofsky's famous essay *Die Perspektive als symbolische Form* (Woodfield, 1994) as founded on an incoherent view of pictorial space. It was while working with Kris on a project on caricature that Kris found a place for him as a research assistant at the Warburg Institute, which had recently been transferred from Hamburg to London, to work on the papers of Aby Warburg. Gombrich's work on Warburg, starting in 1936, offered him an unusual insight into the possible subject of cultural psychology, which he had already encountered in a variant form in the work of Max Dvorák.

Gombrich's Warburgian labours were interrupted by the Second World War, when he worked as a radio monitor for the BBC. That experience gave him a thorough acquaintance with the practical problems of perception and a convic-

tion of the importance of projection in accounting for the nature of the perceptual experience. After the war he returned to the Warburg Institute and frequented the library of the British Psychological Society to familiarize himself with recent currents and debates in the study of visual perception. At the same time as writing his ground-breaking studies on Botticelli's *Mythologies* and *Icones Symbolicae* he also set to work on a project on 'The Realm and Range of the Image', which he submitted to Walter Neurath at Thames and Hudson in March 1947. In his covering letter he declared that the project 'shouldn't take too long' but ultimately it didn't surface as a book until the publication of *Art and Illusion*: *A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* in 1960; its other side, *Symbolic Images*, appeared in 1972; neither volume should be read without the other. The project grew and eventually turned into an impressive series of publications, enhanced by *The Sense of Order* and the yet to be published volume on primitivist trends in Western visual taste. Gombrich's work has turned into the proverbial elephant which, when touched in various places by blind people, has been declared to have a multitude of identities; it is, however, all of a piece even though its size might have considerably expanded.

One of the main problems facing Gombrich when he started his scholarly career was the uncritical acceptance of the idea that the figurative artist produced images of what he saw, with the qualification that through historical time and across cultures people have seen differently. Psychologists subscribed to the notion that phylogeny repeats ontogeny, that the development of 'primitive' art reflects the development of child art, which in turn represents a coming to terms with the way in which the world really looks. No thought appears to have been given either to the cultural context of the child's development of drawing techniques (Gombrich, 1939) or to the difference between notation and depiction (Gombrich, 1999). For a long time, and even now (Roth and Frisby, 1986), psychologists have used line drawings in object recognition tests without realizing the inherent difficulties in assuming such an easy equation between drawing and object. The mimetic assumption also affected early semiotics by way of Peirce's theory of the iconic sign, a sign which has a representational content by virtue of its looking naturally like the object it signifies.

Functionalism, or the Loss of a Subject

There is a double ambiguity at the heart of talk about Art. First, the extension of the term has varied according to language and history. As Kristeller pointed out (1992) 'Art' is different from 'Kunst' and again from 'Beaux Arts' and 'Arti del Disegno'. Second, as Abrams argued (1991) the modern concept of Art emerged in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

In Gombrich's view any general theory about the ambitions of Artists or of the nature of Art is doomed to failure. At any moment of culture and history, artists are subject to specific demands placed upon their work which shifts with

cultural transformations (Gombrich, 1999). Consequently, as he famously declared at the opening to *The Story of Art*, 'There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists' (1950, p. 15).

All acts of pictorial production are performed within a social context. That social context will dictate the overall function of imagery as well as the subfunctions appropriate to the particular image. Different cultures place different demands on visual imagery: the most general was that of substitution and the most limited was that of depiction of an actual scene in nature from a point of view. Failure to recognize the institutional nature of art results in the assumption of communality of intent where there is none. It would be a mistake, for example, to assume that tribal artists have had the same formal preoccupations as a small handful of modern European artists. The description of the formal features of works of art is a rhetorical construction (see Gombrich, 1963b; 1968) and any specific visual characteristics that artists' work might have had would have been intimately linked to the contingent demands of their culture. It would be quite rash to assume strict analogies between cultures.

The Semiotic Model and Mental Set

In 1949 Gombrich published a devastating review of Charles Morris's *Signs, Language and Behavior* which criticized a number of ideas, particularly the notion of the possible equivalence between pictures and sentences and the notion of the iconic sign. He concluded by suggesting that:

> Guardi relies on the beholder's capacity to read 'iconicity' into his sign. The contextual, emotional, or formal means by which this type of interpretation is evoked or facilitated – in other words, the relation between objective 'iconicity' and psychological projection – would have to form one of the main fields of a descriptive semiotic of the image. Perhaps it will show that what has been called the history of 'seeing' is really the history of a learning process through which a socially coherent public was trained by the artist to respond in a given manner to certain abbreviated signs. (Gombrich, 1987, p. 248)

The representational content of an image is not based upon likeness but on substitution: a photograph of a person may stand for a social type and a child's scrawl may stand for its mother.

In 1951 he proposed an alternative model for the phenomenon of semiosis. At the root of artistic representation is representation as such; this is a matter of the logic of representation, not of particular historical or individual developments. Visual representation occurs out of substitutes 'which happen to fit into biological or psychological locks' (Gombrich, 1963a, p. 4). The importance of a substitute is not resemblance but affordance of function. Gombrich's Freudian language of 1951 is now easily translatable into J. J. Gibson's language of ecological perception (see Gibson, 1979): a child's hobby-horse affords 'riding', a

tribal mask affords ritual transformation, Praxiteles' *Aphrodite*, according to Pliny, afforded a sexual response and Constable's *Wivenhoe Park* affords perception of a landscape.

In *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich combined the idea of the substitute with Karl Bühler's notion of the relational model. The relational model depends upon the existence of a signifying field out of which information may be generated. The Ordnance Survey map depends on a system of map-making which is exemplified in the map of a particular place; musical scores depend upon systems of notation which are exemplified in scores for particular pieces of music. Egyptian hieroglyphic imagery was made possible by procedural conventions, as was classic Greek art; the conventions were, however, different. Representational fields are governed by what Bühler called the 'principle of abstractive relevance'. All art forms may be processed in terms of the relationship between significance and redundancy. Herodotus tells us that the Egyptians did not regard similarity in appearance to have any relevance for the depiction of the gods (*Histories*, 2, 46) and Apollonius of Tyana knew that an archaic statue did not symbolize inflexibility, it had just been made that way (Gombrich, 1960, p. 134).

Looking at imagery produced within the Western naturalistic tradition involves a different kind of mental set from looking at maps, diagrams, hieroglyphs, ideographs and other styles of representation, such as Chinese, Indian or Mayan. A work produced within the tradition produces visual cues for information pick-up which strive to be consistent with the cues offered by a possibly existent object, situation or event viewed from a particular station point. Cues turn into clues in the case of the depiction of narrative action; at this point relationships between image and text become paramount as does the adoption of conventions derived from ritual and gesture (Gombrich, 1964; 1966b; 1969; 1972).

Within the Western naturalist tradition there has been a diminishing reliance on conventions, or visual notations, within describable ranges of imagery; the depiction of landscapes is a case in point. Leonardo used notations for mountains and developed them into articulated schemata which could be taken for drawings from the motif; whether they were is another matter. The projects incorporated within tradition have included the mastery of space (from Masaccio through to the quadratisti of the Baroque style), texture (Dutch still-life painting), human emotion (Rembrandt), light (the Impressionists) and feature-specific detail (photography). A gain in one direction frequently represents a loss in another and that is built into the nature of artistic effect.

To assume such similar striving across cultures and through historical time is an act of interpretative imperialism as it is tantamount to claiming that practitioners outside of the tradition are basically up to the same thing as practitioners within it, though they just do it differently. Psychologists such as Hagen (1986) and Willatts (1997) have used the notion of a variety of projective systems to suggest that the world's various cultures depict the world under various transformational schemes without appreciating that the central notion of depiction is

specific to the culture of the Western naturalist tradition. Hagen further confuses the matter by connecting the valuational dimension of Art to the technical dimension of specific forms of imagery. There is no way in which anyone would want to suggest that works of art standing outside that tradition are any poorer, as works of art, just because they stand outside it. There are scales of value in every style and the more complex that style becomes the less risk there is that its works may be poor, but this is beyond proof.

The varieties of depiction within the Western naturalist tradition do not entail relativism. All visual representations are relational models and any specific model may exemplify matters of visual interest. Images created on the basis of a perspectival scheme invite the spectator to witness a scene from a particular point of view, maps and other forms of schematic imagery do not. All representation is through a medium and different media open different representational possibilities, though they may all be convincing representations of the subject they depict. A pub-crawler's map is different from an Ordnance Survey map, while both may embody objectively correct information about the features they describe.

Gombrich and the Psychologists

Gombrich has liberally acknowledged his debts to psychologists throughout his work but his apparent eclecticism is regulated by a selective principle. This is connected to the influence on his thought of the ideas of Karl Popper. To quote recent personal correspondence:

> In the Preface to *Art and Illusion* I acknowledge his influence on p. ix, and say that 'he established the priority of the scientific hypothesis over the recording of sense data.' On p. 231 I explain this in greater detail and say that 'without some initial system, without a first guess to which we can stick unless it is disproved, we could indeed make no "sense" of the milliards of ambiguous stimuli that reach us from our environment. In order to learn, we must make mistakes, and the most fruitful mistake which nature could have implanted in us would be the assumption of even greater simplicities than we are likely to meet with in this bewildering world of ours.' It is in this light that I see the achievement of Gestalt psychology. *The Sense of Order* continues this line of thought – its introduction has a motto from Popper's *Objective Knowledge*. I need not repeat it here because the first few pages of that book, including as far as page 5, deal with this matter. You may remember from pp. 121–6 I indulged in a little science fiction, speaking of a 'break-spotter'. It tries to account for the fact that expected regularities, such as continuous noise, are experienced as redundant and soon sink below the threshold of awareness, but any unexpected deviation arouses our attention; my analysis of ornament and decoration tries to exemplify this. I do not think that anybody has yet commented on my discussion of the tuning-fork illusion on p. 124.

This is not the place to go into detail over Gombrich's disputes with various psychologists. His work has constantly been targeted by the Gestalt psychologist Rudolph Arnheim over the importance which he attaches to learning and culture in the experience of the work of art (Arnheim, 1962). He is also opposed to Richard Gregory's inductivist approach to perception, which rests in the classical doctrine of the association of ideas (see Gregory, 1980). He has argued against J. J. Gibson's view that the perception of shape has to be derivative from the perception of pictures (see Woodfield, 1996b, p. 159) and his emphasis on the role of projection in perception has also found little favour in Gibsonian circles (see Kennedy, 1980).

Art and the Psychological

As Gombrich wrote in 1937: 'Artistic achievement involves a passage from the eye to the hand, from the mind to the canvas. But must this notion of achievement serve for all conceptions of art?' (p. 70). On a wide historical and cultural scale the modern conception of the artistic process can be seen to have its roots in Romantic theory. A major transformation in artistic practice occurred in the Renaissance through Leonardo's development of a novel drawing technique (Gombrich, 1952). Romantic theory encouraged a notion of self-expression which would have been strange to Renaissance artists. Ironically, Freud took issue with the Surrealists over their self-perception (Gombrich, 1966c).

Although Gombrich was initiated into Freudian ways of thought by his mentor Ernst Kris, he has only given it limited credence as many of its claims are beyond testing. He made fruitful use of Freud's understanding of the verbal joke, as opposed to the dream, in accounting for artistic creativity. Jokes operate within the public domain and demand 'the most skillful exploitation of all the peculiarities of the vocabulary' (Gombrich, 1981, p. 106). Artists inherit schemata from their peers which they may either reiterate or exploit to effect: 'the most successful witticism must satisfy at least two standards, that of meaning and that of form, and in the choice of both there lies an element of style' (Gombrich, 1981, p. 107). Dreams are private affairs and to use them as a model for creativity doesn't offer a criterion of achievement.

Although there is a modern demand for the artist to express herself, which is an empty demand, traditional conceptions of art were founded on the notion of the conspicuous display of skill which, again, is a public matter. The notion of intention is ordinarily confused with that of motivation and intention is not a matter of events in the head; it has rather to do with the adoption of a strategy in a logic of the situation. In such a context, talk of achievement is possible.

The concept of meaning is notoriously ambiguous, having itself many meanings (Ogden and Richards, 1936), and to import a linguistic category of meaning into the visual arts is to mistake objects for sentences:

> Only in the discussion of language can we distinguish between statements that have a meaning and strings of words that are devoid of meaning. Images are not the equivalent of statements. . . . A painting of a moonlit landscape does not 'mean' a moonlit landscape, it represents one. (Gombrich, 1985, p. 109)

Rather than ask for the 'one true meaning' of any painting, the historian is better advised to ask what its purpose was within its context; in this sense, meaning is use. A painting may be used to illustrate a literary text, in which case it is incumbent on the historian to offer evidence for the use of that text. Alternatively, an image may be purely decorative. Works of art may come to attract new meanings, particularly through reuse by other artists and through changes in social use.

Cultural Psychology

Early in his career Gombrich identified the physiognomic fallacy, which interpreted works of art as manifestations of the mentality of the age in which they were produced, as if there were such a unified mentality and as if the appearance of works of art were open to simple reductive analysis (Gombrich, 1937; 1951b). Our own historical and cultural distance from other societies prevents us from recognizing diversity where it was seen to occur: 'the idea of a monolithic culture doesn't apply even to small tribal societies'. And as far as an artwork's role in a society is concerned:

> one of the things we have learned from psychoanalysis is that what is successful in society will have many functions at the same time. The picture of the criminal was not so much a 'wanted' poster as a magic imprecation, and it may well also have been a display of the skill of Leonardo or Botticelli, who actually painted criminals hanging on the wall of the town hall. Most things in society . . . fulfill many functions. The number of specialized tools is very small, and art certainly belongs to those institutions which meet many demands at the same time. (Gombrich, 1973, p. 883)

Consequently the appeal of any artwork is generated out of the multiple, yet specific, demands which may have been made upon its production. It is naive to think of a work of art existing in the state which it does as a definable effect of one determinable cause. Rather than regard a work of art as a static reflection of a monolithic culture, it may best be thought of as a turbulent state of a dynamic historical stream.

The central difficulty of a cultural psychology of art is its simplistic assumption of a 'mentality' of an epoch, which has assumed the force of a metaphysical postulate: 'I would not deny that "mentality" is a useful term, but I think it is also true that people change their mentalities. I'm rather attracted by the sociological concept of role-playing in this respect' (Gombrich, 1973, p. 882).

The fact is that at any period in history, society affords individuals the possibility of playing out a multiplicity of roles which may entail contradictory stances: tastes in reading may not coincide with religious and ethical behaviour, which might in turn conflict with political beliefs. Misconstrual is a common historical danger. Botticelli's *Primavera* has been taken for a joyful evocation of the paganism of the Renaissance but an enjoyment in reading Apuleius's bawdy novel *The Golden Ass* is not incompatible with regular devout attendance at church and a taste for horoscopes. Furthermore, an image in the International Gothic style has resonances of courtly tastes which are a far cry from Warburg's pathos formulae of flying accessories.

Gombrich's historical casework in this area, starting with his analysis of the work of Giulio Romano, is a striking demonstration of the sensitivity and tact which is needed to locate a specific work of art within a particular milieu. In the terms of *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*, Giulio's architecture was a product of the spiritual crisis engendered by the Sack of Rome; it represented the *mentalité* of an epoch. In Gombrich's terms, Giulio responded to his fun-loving patron's demand for the bizarre:

> in the special climate of the Gonzaga Court of Mantua the court painter was obliged to entertain and amuse his lord who was not an easy man to please. So Giulio Romano had to practice a different kind of art from what Raphael and Michelangelo had done in Rome. (Gombrich, 1993, p. 162)

Not only are there regional differences within a particular period but there are highly specific differences between individual patrons' tastes. A style might offer a range of possibilities, but an effect is local to a situation. Fashion, creation and perception are linked, but they are linked in ways which are open to rational investigation if not complete solution (see Gombrich, 1999).

Postulating a change in human perceptual capacities for every change in style demonstrates a clear failure to understand the nature of the wide variety of representational processes which are open to human creativity. As Heinrich Schäfer observed (1919) the perspectival view had been available in Akkadian myth. It is this capacity which needs further exploration by psychologists and it is significant that J. J. Gibson's own dispute with Gombrich (Woodfield, 1996b, p. 159) has not yet reached the pages of the professional psychological literature.

Rejecting Riegl's outmoded psychology, Gombrich has been concerned to develop defensible hypotheses concerning the relationships between perception, representation and creation in both naturalistic and ornamental art. His work has also offered a powerful alternative to the forms of cultural psychological explanation offered by the expressionist historian Max Dvorák and the cultural historian Aby Warburg.

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Chapter 35

Hermeneutics and Art Theory

Nicholas Davey

Art works from the distant past, from different cultures and, indeed, from the contemporary world can pose a similar problem: they are not readily intelligible, seem enigmatic and can appear obscure. Contemporary hermeneutics has been described as aiming to restore a 'voice' to those art works which can no longer 'speak' clearly and directly. This chapter will offer a critical introduction to the heritage and aspirations of hermeneutical theory and will consider its pertinence to the understanding of art, its theory and its practice. The chapter's subsections will discuss the classical origins of the term and its subsequent unfolding as a discipline of interpretation; the character of hermeneutics as 'theory' of interpretation and the relation of its 'methods' to art theory in general; a systematic review of the principal philosophical assumptions which drive the hermeneutical approach to art; and, finally, an outline of the formal impact hermeneutics can have upon the teaching of the expressive arts.

Hermeneutics: Spirit and Historical Letter

Hermeneutics can be described as that mode of philosophical thinking which tries to reconnect with the 'spirit' of the letter when the letter itself has become opaque. Many will find the relationship between hermeneutics and art theory somewhat obscure since this mode of philosophy has been for the most part associated with the literary rather than the visual. So what is the animating 'spirit' of hermeneutics itself?

The word hermeneutics invokes the name of Hermes who was thought of as the messenger of the Gods, the giver of signs, venerated by wayfarers and in particular by those who had to travel in the dark. His allotted task was to interpret what the gods wished to convey and to translate it into terms intelligible to mortals. Hermes's predicament addresses all who work with expression, for what is given to us through insight or intuition has to be understood and then translated into forms which permit others to grasp what we have understood. Hermes

presides over the tension between seeing a truth and communicating it. It is not inappropriate that he was also the god of those who travelled dark and difficult roads. He was frequently portrayed in the form of modestly phallic wayside markers appearing with Aphrodite who had evidently aroused his interest. Some have argued that night is Hermes's proper provenance as it is darkness which reveals our need for guidance and which thereby allows the world to be illuminated by a new, inner light. The experiences which the myth of Hermes recounts concern that strange relation between understanding the nature of our engagement with art and coming to appreciate our predicament as mortals: our perpetual need for understanding and guidance, our sense of trying to find, follow and keep to a path, the experiences of being drawn on, of being excited by the anticipation of where a route might take us and, finally, the realization that as human beings we are not unlike Hermes who is always on the way somewhere but with no place of his own to finally rest in. The history of the unfolding 'letter' of the hermeneutical 'spirit' is more formal. It can be articulated by three significant moments: hermeneutics and biblical interpretation; hermeneutics and the human sciences; and phenomenological hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics and biblical interpretation

Before the close of the eighteenth century, hermeneutics was primarily devoted to the question of biblical interpretation. Is the Bible a *sensus litteralis* whose meaning can be analytically derived from its parts or is it a work which can only be understood in its context? If the former is the case does history play no role in our understanding of God and, if the latter is the case, is a knowledge of God limited by questions of historical context? (The analogy with the question of art is clear: is the art work to be understood as a context-less autonomous construct or as a context-dependent entity?) With regard to theological hermeneutics, the works of Chladenius (1710–59) bring this tradition to culmination though, as the contemporary writings of Louth and Pannenberg reveal, its concerns are far from redundant (Louth 1989, Pannenberg 1997). Not only do such pivotal modern hermeneutical terms as the *epiphanic* (coming into appearance) derive from theological hermeneutics but also such ancient questions of how the living 'spirit' can resuscitate the dead letter of the past and continue to guide contemporary hermeneutics in its confrontation with historical and cultural alterity.

Hermeneutics and the human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften)

Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Dilthey (1833–1911) articulate hermeneutics' second moment when they elevate it to a universal method of understanding concerned with grasping the meaning of all cultural expressions irrespective of whether they were political, artistic or philosophical. Both thinkers tend to the view that human beings express themselves in action. Action is intended expression and, therefore, the task of hermeneutics is to understand the 'meaning'

within human expressions. Schleiermacher's 'technical' and 'psychological' theories of interpretation endeavour, accordingly, to grasp a text's meaning both in terms of its formal structures and as an expression of the author's intentionality. Dilthey extends Schleiermacher's arguments into a general theory of cultural understanding which views all social acts as the outward expression of an inner *Weltanschauung* (world-view). Such a world view, once identified and reconstructed, can (if properly understood) offer empathetic access to an artist's interiority. Dilthey's hermeneutics is therefore disposed to read the letter of a work as the record or trace of the artist's spirit (intentionality). The method inevitably tends towards the biographical as indeed Dilthey's own writings on Goethe and Schleiermacher indicate. Although the psychologistic elements within Dilthey's method have been long discredited (how, for example, can I be certain that what I reconstruct as the artist's inner world is not my own construction?), and although the reduction of an art work's meaning to being nothing other than expression of what the artist intended has largely been rejected, Dilthey's writings remain of some importance. The recent writings of Giddens and Outhwaite reveal how Dilthey's wish to outline what is distinctive about artistic and historical understanding is one of the first systematic attempts to articulate what differentiates artistic modes of intuition and understanding from scientific insights and explanations (Giddens, 1976; Outhwaite, 1975).[1] George Steiner also argues that in the Postmodern predicament in which the critical licence of theory is boundless, Dilthey's appeal to intentionality permits the more plausible interpretations of an art to be sieved from those which are mere expressions of technical virtuosity.

Phenomenological hermeneutics

The third (and for our purposes) decisive moment of hermeneutic thought concerns the phenomenological philosophies of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–). Phenomenological philosophy is primarily interested in the question of how the objects of which we become conscious are constituted in our experience of them. Thus whereas Dilthey's hermeneutics was driven by epistemological concerns (how do we come to 'know' an artist's intentionality?), the thinking of Heidegger and Gadamer moves towards ontological issues (what exactly comes into being within our experience of art?).[2]

In the case of Heidegger, *hermeneuein* no longer denotes what it meant for Aristotle, namely, an exegesis or laying out (*Auslegung*) of what is 'there' in a text or painting: it suggests an engaged 'response' (*Entsprechung*), a listening in the manner of a saying-after (*nachsagen*) or thinking-along-with what the work itself says. Hermeneutics is not merely a matter of interpreting pre-given works: understanding is not what we aim at, it is what we are and do. We seek to interpret because 'things matter to us'. Because our practices and values are shaped by our being-in-the-world, we can engage with a work as an 'expression' (*Aussage*) of its world. Whereas for Dilthey, a general theory of interpretation

leads to understanding the specifics of a work, for Heidegger it is the understanding (the categories of our being) which enables interpretation. Gadamer, however, reverses but by no means refutes the direction of Heidegger's thinking. Whereas Heidegger analyses the general structure of our being-in-the-world before considering matters of subjective response, Gadamer starts from the immediacies of personal experience in order to ascertain the 'substantiality' or tradition which informs it. The issue of understanding becomes dialectical: how does historical and cultural tradition 'show' itself in an art work and how does our interpretive engagement with what is shown change the latter's historical nature? Gadamer is fascinated by art's ability to interrogate our self-understanding and is concerned to show how art's revelations are as defensible as any propositional claim to knowledge.

The interests of Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer gain continued expression in the more recent writings of Gianni Vattimo, Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor and John Caputo. Folding his study of Nietzsche and Derrida into that of hermeneutics, Vattimo insists upon the radical contingency of all cultural structures: all cultural artefacts are the result of interpretation. A painting is not independent of its interpretations but rather 'is' the (fluid) sum of both its receptions and their differences. Ricoeur blends a reading of Hegel and Wittgenstein into his account of understanding. All human experience is articulated by, or is like, a language. Hermeneutics must lay bare the 'sense-making' operations of an art work, for Ricoeur holds that art does not exist for its own sake but aims to bring into a spoken or visual discourse an experience, a way of living in and of being-in-the-world which precedes it and demands to be said.

Concerning all three moments, it can be argued that hermeneutics has the distinction of being an active, unbroken tradition of philosophy whose central theme – transformation through understanding – seems to reveal something of the defining experience of cultural modernity: confrontation with otherness. Gadamer's preoccupation with understanding grasped as the mutually transforming fusion of different cultural horizons is a contemporary expression of a problematic which reaches back to Herder's attempt to 'feel' (empathize) his way into the perspective of another. Both hermeneutics and the arts of modernity are very much preoccupied with the question of strangeness and the desire to discover in it something of the familiar. It is not surprising, therefore, that the rise of hermeneutic thought should parallel the ascent of social and cultural modernity.

Hermeneutics and the Question of (Art) Theory

Hermeneutics is not readily included within the corpus of art theory for two reasons. Whereas it offers profound theoretical reflections on the experience of art, hermeneutics does not offer a specific *theory* of art. Hermeneutics is also highly critical of many of the assumptions which underwrite the 'theoretical'

endeavour especially when they are applied to art. As the wide range of interpretive stances associated with the hermeneutical approach to art are outlined in the next section, we shall first consider the grounds of hermeneutical scepticism towards art theory.

Contemporary hermeneutics is intimately attentive to the intensities of *what occurs* in our experience of art. It is preoccupied with the truth-claim of a work of art. The art work is treated as a *dialogical* partner which addresses us and places demands on our attention. Thus, hermeneutical aesthetics is not concerned with theorizing art as an expression of the *Zeitgeist* or as a symptom of sociopolitical representation. To theorize art works as the results of historical or social production processes is to become blind to their autonomy and contemporaneousness. Such theorization focuses not on the works *per se* but on what they are taken to signify or represent as historical or social phenomena. The consequences of such theorization is clear. The art work is reduced to being of secondary importance. It becomes evidence for something beyond itself: 'a means of demonstration' or 'evidence' for a broader thesis. For an art work to fulfil itself in this secondary fashion, it has to efface itself as an autonomous work and subject itself to the theorem it is used to demonstrate. In other words, the importance of the art work lies not in itself but in its status as evidence. Hermeneutics in contrast confronts art theory with a profoundly awkward question: is the art theoretician actually concerned with the autonomy of the art work, with opening him- or herself to the risk of being addressed by the work and perhaps having, as a consequence, to rethink the presuppositions of his or her self-understanding? Or is the theoretician content to (ab)use the art work as a means to sustain campaigns of methodology which do not directly appertain to the work itself? It does not follow that because art history appeals to singular works of art, it is therefore concerned to inform us about art. To the contrary, under the pretence that it informs us about art, art history can all too easily subjugate art to the end of informing us about history.

Hermeneutics even intimates the futility of *all* art theory. It protests that any individual art work will always exceed and thereby elude theoretical capture. Acknowledging art's enigmatic (authentic) nature neither betrays hermeneutics as a subjectivism nor as an irrationalism but as a sensitivity which (precisely because it is conscious of how human understanding is irrigated by sources of meaning which can never be rendered fully clear and distinct) regards the attempt by theoretical reason to enlighten every aspect of art as, at best, naive and, at worst, tasteless. Such scepticism is fuelled by considerable reservations concerning the restricted notion of theory entertained by art practice. Under the influence of Nietzsche, both Heidegger and Gadamer are acutely conscious of how the unavoidable historical placement and finitude of the theoretician raise questions as to the legitimacy of universality of his or her truth claims about art. Both philosophers sense in such claims the imperious presence of a guiding subjectivity (will to power). Thus, within the theoretical attitude, the knowing subject is put in the position of standing aloof from his subject matter, not

seeking to be changed by it but only to have his methodological presuppositions confirmed. For such a theoretician, the art work is rendered secondary to the theorem it is employed to demonstrate. To counter the imperious tendencies of 'theory', Heidegger and Gadamer insist that the surreptitious and manipulative tendencies of modern theory have corrupted an older meaning of the term.

In ancient Greece *theoria* implied attentive participation whilst *theoros* meant a delegate to a festival who had no other function than to witness what manifested itself at such a gathering. *Theoria* speaks of a true participation in, an attentiveness to, and a complete giving of oneself to what one sees. Unlike modern theory (which seeks in procrustean fashion to reduce the art work to the assumptions of its own paradigms), *theoros* speaks of a subject who is open to having his preconceptions thoroughly interrogated by an art work. Rather than subordinating a work to a theoretical model, hermeneutic thought strives to establish the conditions whereby the work can challenge our interpretive assumptions more directly. If, as was implied in the first section, hermeneutics seeks the conditions which allow the art work to speak (again), then it interrogates our own self-understanding. Whereas Nietzsche observed (critically) that the aim of theory is to reduce everything to the familiar and the calculable, Gadamer claims that 'the intimacy with which the work of art touches us is at the same time, in enigmatic fashion, a shattering and a demolition of the familiar. It is not only the "This art thou" disclosed in a joyous and frightening shock; it also says to us; "Thou must alter thy life"' (Gadamer, 1976, p. 104). It would be grotesque, however, to imagine that Gadamer's argument points to an antitheoretical irrationalism. The latter entails a subjectivism quite alien to his thinking. Subjectivism, as Nietzsche understood, can often drive theory especially when the latter is understood as a mode of instrumentalist reasoning. What Gadamer's appeal to *theoria* invokes is something quite contrary, namely, a mode of being in which one has the strength to 'look away from oneself and a looking out toward the other, disregarding oneself and listening for what the other' person, text, or art work has to say (Gadamer, 1998, p. 35).

Hermeneutical Approaches to Art

Hermeneutical aesthetics is not so much a theory in the modern sense but a constellation of different interpretive perspectives each of which gives us access to understanding another dimension of an art work. Hermeneutics may abjure a universal method but it does not renounce either methodical or rigorous interpretive approaches to aspects of an art work's 'truth'. The general features of this plurality of approach can be summarized under the following seven headings.

(1) *Art and the transformation of the real.* Hermeneutic thought articulates the conviction that art does not represent (*vorstellen*), copy or falsify the given

world but allows that which is within the world to present (*darstellen*) or actualize itself (*verwirklichen*) more fully. When we awake from a work's grip, we are not disappointed for it brings us to understand more of the world. Paradoxically, it is precisely art's illusory nature that allows it to effect a double transformation of the real. First, within the everyday, lines of meaning are invariably open and unresolved whereas in the art work they are brought full circle. Art brings to fulfilment and thereby transforms the implicit potential of actuality. Second, it is the very difference between the art work and actuality which allows us to not only to see but also to criticize and affect more of what is at play within actuality. From the perspective of hermeneutic thought, with art there is no taking flight from the world, only the risk of succumbing to its potentialities.

(2) *Art works must be understood as addressing questions.* Art must be understood as addressing questions, that is, as offering visual responses to historically evolved themes and subject matters. That the latter can never be exhausted by a work permits a dialogical interaction with them. On the one hand, we can appraise, criticize or appreciate a work in the light of what we have come to know with historical hindsight of a subject matter and, on the other hand, precisely because it might come from another epoch or culture, a work can throw light on the limits of our understanding of a given thematic. Hermeneutic interaction with a work does not merely seek to interpret (appreciate) a subject matter, but through interpreting (engaging with) it, to open up what has still to be expressed within it and thereby open pathways down which future practice might travel.

(3) *The understanding of art rests upon expressive historicity.* Hermeneutics broadly fuses two theses: the Kantian view that we assimilate the world and express ourselves within it according to shared cognitive and expressive frameworks, and the Hegelian view that such frameworks emerge and evolve through time. In so far as artistic expression externalizes our implicit frameworks of meaning and value, we are able over time to recognize more of our inner capacities. Yet because art is an artefact of history, neither it nor what it expresses is invariant with regard to the universality of rationality, critical norms, or rules of coherence. Yet Gadamer willingly embraces such differences because they magnify interpretations of subject matters not afforded by our immediate historical horizon.

(4) *An art work cannot be separated from the totality of its interpretations.* This outgrowth of Leibnizian perspectivism articulates a work as a complex layering of subjective view points which cross over and embrace one another. Nietzsche radicalized this perspectivism and transformed it into an *Interpretationsphilosophie* which held that the work is nothing more or less than the totality of interpretations. This leads to Gadamer's thesis that a work may be aesthetically finished but it is never complete, i.e. it can always be viewed differently.

(5) *The enigmatic quality of art works is precisely what is of value about art.* The resistance of art to theoretical capture reminds us of the limits of our

understanding and thereby opens us to the possibility of understanding yet more about both it and ourselves.

(6) *An understanding of an art work reaches beyond a grasp of the artist's expressed intentions.* Recent hermeneutics are not a reconstructive method and neither do such hermeneutics seek to rebuild the historical context of a work, nor to recover the artist's original intentions. We might re-establish the way in which historical works were produced but we can no longer 'see' in the manner of a seventeenth-century person. The artist's intentions may be instructive but they do not exhaust the meaning of a work. The significance of a work relates to its subsequent effects upon how a subject matter is later understood, effects which, were we to locate them exclusively within the artist's intentionality, we would never see. To recognize the limited importance of intentionality in this context is not to say that historical awareness is unimportant. To the contrary, it is of immense importance since understanding, for Gadamer, is not a matter of establishing identity or sameness (Dilthey) but of ascertaining the genuinely different. Only on the basis of difference are dialogue and understanding possible. By means of such differences we can both arrive at an appreciation of why in its approach to a subject matter an historical art work is individual, and thereby gain a fuller consciousness about how our presuppositions about a subject matter differ from those of the work. Such dialogue expands and fills out more of the possibilities within a subject matter.

(7) *Hermeneutics argues neither that art is a language nor that the operations of art can be reduced to words.* However, an understanding of the dynamics of linguistic intercourse gives insight into how art works communicate. Both Heidegger and Gadamer esteem conversation as paradigmatic of the aletheic dimension of language, i.e. the ability of the said to bring the unspoken to mind. The experience of having something brought to mind is an objective occurrence occasioned by conversation itself. Were conversation merely an exchange of subjective preferences, no conversation would have taken place but if it occurs – and this is the crucial point – its participants will have undergone an intimate and unexpected alteration in their outlook. Gadamer therefore maintains that there is no fundamental difference between experiencing the aletheic powers of conversation and experiencing what art discloses to us. Both occasion events which can, contrary to one's willing and doing, disrupt one's self-possession and equilibrium.

Hermeneutics is no stranger to a distinction drawn in analytic philosophy between utterance and meaning: if I understand what is said, I can distinguish the meaning of what is said from the manner in which it is conveyed. Thus language is the basis of the distinction between what an art work addresses (its subject matter) and how it communicates it. Hermeneutics reveals thereby how art works point beyond themselves (allude to the subject matter) and yet occasion the coming into presence of what is beyond them. It is not just words which

bring a totality of meaning into play without being able to express it, but it is words which allow us to understand how art can do so too. Furthermore, in so far as hermeneutics shows how the differentiation between the saying and the said, and between the subject matter and the interpretation, also apply to art, it reveals how our understanding of art is as discursive and dialogical as our understanding of language. Individual aesthetic experience is therefore not a solitary monologue on private pleasure but an integral part of a shared historical discourse concerning the realization of meaning. Far from subordinating image to word, hermeneutical aesthetics seeks to bring into language that which is held within an image but can never be caught in a single glance. Such words bid us look again.

Hermeneutics and Art Practice

Recent disagreements about the value of art theory in the teaching of Fine Art suggest that the emphasis which hermeneutics gives to openness, dialogue and the primacy of aesthetic experience make it of exemplary relevance for those navigating the perilous waters between art practice and theoretical reflection. On the one hand, with its deep suspicion of abstract theorizing, hermeneutics sides with practice for, like the latter, it understands that significant experience is always particular. Yet, on the other hand, precisely because significant experience is particular, hermeneutics also acknowledges the claim of theory, namely, that meaningful experience in art is always a particularization of a given subject matter. Hermeneutics thus operationalizes Kant's dictum that concepts without intuitions (sensuous particularization) are empty and intuitions without concepts (ideational frameworks) are blind, and utilizes it as the basis of dialogical engagement between art theory and practice.

Hermeneutic theory and art practice are not irreconcilable opposites but complementary discourses able, in Gadamer's phrase, to 'creatively interfere' with one another. The historical situatedness of both theory and practice and their mutual susceptibility to art's subject matters allow a significant overlap of concern. After all, interpretive and artistic activity are both practices. Though each approaches the utterance, conveyance and understanding of artistic meaning from the perspective of its own priorities, their joint claim to art's subject matters and the reciprocal dependence of idea and instantiation within aesthetics makes the meeting of interpretative and expressive practice almost unavoidable.

Dialogue between interpretation and art practice does not involve translating the perspective of one party into that of the other. Rather, the proximity of one perspective incites the other to an increased reflexive awareness of its nature and limits. Because of engaging with the other, each becomes more knowingly its own. By revealing practice's ideational structures, interpretation does not turn practice into theory. To the contrary, practice is put in contact with its own

intrinsically reflective aspects. The illumination of its historical subject matters and contexts enables it to achieve the realization that what it had formerly taken to be other than itself (theory) was always part of itself. Nor do such exchanges demand of theory that it relinquish its conceptual concerns, only that it too should recognize how its situatedness, its mode of presentation, rhetoric and style, shape both the nature of its own practice and its approach to what it assumes artistic practice to be. It might indeed be argued that whereas the subject matters of art will always exceed their historical instantiation, the nature of artistic practice will always exceed the concept of practice. Thus, the exchange between interpretation and practice leaves neither side unchanged and yet allows each to become more intensely itself.

The distance of the hermeneutical theorist does not indicate a disinterested disposition towards art but a selfless involvement which applies itself to the task of bringing the complexities of that which is at play within an art work to a completer presence. That distance also permits the opening of a critical space by means of which the practitioner can achieve an awareness of the 'taken-for-granted' elements in his or her perspective and thereby reappropriate if not reconfigure the unthought elements of his or her own creative identity. Engagement with hermeneutic reflection should enable the practitioner to alter or, indeed, enhance the prereflective assumptions informing their practice.

Because reflective dialogue opens what is an in fact an inexhaustible potential for meaningfulness within an art work, hermeneutic thought naturally resists the false certainties claimed by every form of theoretical reductionism. It recognizes, furthermore, that any interpretive thematization of a work must acknowledge the practitioner's viewpoint. Without that acknowledgement, hermeneutic thematization could not offer, and thereby would prevent, the practitioner from recognizing, any reconfiguring of his or her assumptions. The hermeneutic engagement would accordingly fail. The practitioner's viewpoint is equally important because, as hermeneutic theory is aware, the possible interpretations of a work are endless. In determining which are appropriate, a knowledge of the practitioner's self-understanding is invaluable. Without either the interpretative idea taking root in the practitioner's world or the practitioner's intuitions expanding into the realm of the interpretative idea, any hermeneutic thematization will remain abstract and, as a consequence, an art work will remain confined within the silence of its unarticulated assumptions. The meaningfulness of an art work is, of course, not limited to the practitioner's intentions but, nevertheless, though the self-understanding of the practitioner may be transformed by any hermeneutic engagement, that understanding remains an indispensable point of departure and return for critical reflection.

Hermeneutic dialogue aims at that understanding whereby its participants can begin to think differently about their own perspective as a consequence of having engaged with that of the other. What makes the encounter informative rather than estranging is that in the instance of hermeneutical aesthetics and art practice, each side explicitly knows something of the other which the other knows

only implicitly of itself. To be opened to that unarticulated implicitness, interpreter and practitioner must initially permit the other to defamiliarize their own self-understanding. Whilst the theoretician uncovers what the situated practitioner takes for granted, the interpreter is not nearly as familiar with the particularities of practice as the artist. Involvement with the latter can uncover for the theorist contrasting preconceptions concerning, say, application which can lead the interpreter to question the assumptions of her own operational background. Such defamiliarization need not collapse into estrangement if both interpreter and practitioner recognize that their partner in dialogue possesses the means to a fuller understanding of both themselves and what is at play within an art work. Defamiliarization is thus an initial step towards an expansion of hermeneutic objectivity, that is, the seeing of one's own position inverted, as it were, from outside in. Though such understanding can never be complete, the returning to one's own perspective as if it were another makes it more complete.

In conclusion, a hermeneutical dialogue between interpreter and practitioner attempts a reciprocal elucidation of the presuppositions which underwrite both practices. It is an exercise in mutual recognition and fulfilment. For whilst the practitioner needs the interpreter to be free from the assumptions of their immediate horizons, the interpreter needs the particularities and immediacies of practice to concretize the claims of interpretation. Disclosing the differences between art interpretation and art practice should not engender a fortressing of the two mentalities but a recognition that not only does each perspective have something of its own in the other but also that it can bring that which is of its own in the other to a greater pitch of articulation within and for the other. Such dialogue pursues that recognition whereby both theorist and practitioner understand that precisely because they bring each other to a fuller understanding of the other in themselves, they also bring each other to a fuller understanding of both what is at play and what is at stake within what is their real concern, that is, the art work itself.

Notes

1 For a fuller account of the origin of the term 'hermeneutics', see N. Davey in Ian Heywood (1999). A good historical outline of the hermeneutic tradition can be found in Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (1980). Grondin (1994, pp. 169–228) contains a comprehensive list of secondary literature of hermeneutics. For an introduction to the different philosophical characteristics of the various schools of hermeneutic thought, see Smith (1997) and the chapter 'The pathways of hermeneutic philosophy' in Redding (1996). The final chapter in Kogler (1996) gives an excellent account of how the relationship between theory and practice might be thematized. Also to be recommended is Menke, 1999.

2 For Heidegger's principal essays on art and poetry see Heidegger (1975). Gadamer's major statements on the nature of aesthetic experience, the nature of the art work and the character of beauty are to be found in Gadamer (1987 and 1989). Many of

Gadamer's untranslated essays concerning the nature of art appear in Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, *Band 8, Aesthetik und Poetik*, Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr. The German philosopher and art historian who has most extensively applied a hermeneutical aesthetics is Gottfried Boehm. See his 'Bildsinn und Sinnesorgane', *Neue Hefte für Philosophie,* 18/19, 1980; 'Kunsterfahrung als Herausforderung der Ästhetik', in *Kolloquiem Kunst und Philosophie*, vol. 1, *Aesthetische Erfahrung*, W. Oelmüller, (ed.), Paderborn, Schoeningh, 1981, pp. 13ff; and 'Zu einer Hermeneutik des Bildes', in *Die Hermeneutik und die Wissenschaften*, G. Boehm and H.-G. Gadamer, (eds), Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1978. Some of the connections between Heidegger's and Gadamer's aesthetics are explored in my own essay 'Art, religion and the hermeneutics of authenticity', in Kemal and Gaskell, 1999, pp. 66–94.

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Chapter 36

Reciprocity and Reception Theory

Michael Ann Holly

Art History and Critical Theory

The practice of art history in the past two decades has been profoundly affected by theoretical initiatives originating outside the field. The litany of approaches 'imported' from literary theory, the philosophy of history, anthropology and cultural studies is by now legion: feminism, Marxism, semiotics, deconstruction, identity politics, phenomenology, etc. The combination has not necessarily been without friction, as so many recent historiographic reviews have testified. 'Theory' is a word, it would seem, forever freighted with ideological undertones. Nevertheless, its impact on a discipline long known for its conservatism and distinct delineation of epistemological boundaries has been salutary. It would be impossible, of course, to survey the range of all these new and productive directions that have compelled art historians to look at their canonical (and sometimes not-so-canonical) objects anew. In this chapter, I will consider only one, reception theory, and its curious lack of influence on disciplinary inquiries, especially given its roots in phenomenology and predisposition towards the visual. I engage in this exercise in order to see what it might still have to offer to what I consider the most fundamental issue in art historical theory and analysis: the connection between the objects we study and the language we use to explain them.

If indeed it is the case, as many poststructuralist theoreticians and critics have taught us, that a dynamic understanding of interpretation demands that readers or beholders of art come to terms with what they do to the work, it is equally useful to investigate what the work of art does to us: how it reciprocally sets us, its scholars, up as certain spectator–historians, to see things in certain rhetorically specific ways according to its own logic of figuration. In making a case for what he calls the new 'pictorial turn', W. J. T. Mitchell has urged contemporary critics to pay attention to the ways in which actual historical pictures reach out to us and attempt to stake their claim. This act of visual seduction at the originary moment, or 'primal scene', of interpretation, is regarded by

Mitchell as serious play: 'the sense that the image greets or hails or addresses us, that it takes the beholder into the game, enfolds the observer as object for the "gaze" of the picture' (Mitchell, 1964, p. 16).

I want to argue that representational (i.e. spatial, temporal, narratological, etc.) practices encoded in works of art often continue to be encoded in their scholarly commentaries. There are ways in which past works of art, sometimes literally, sometimes metaphorically, prefigure the shape of their subsequent histories. To put the claim in the terms of contemporary critical theory, the issue is one of a productive correspondence of rhetorical ideologies between image and text, the site upon which the criss-crossings of objectivity and subjecthood become enacted. Yet we do not necessary need the intricacies of psychoanalytic theory to tell us that. 'That which was', claimed J. G. Droysen in the nineteenth century, quoted appreciatively a hundred years later by the renowned practitioner of reception history, Hans Robert Jauss, 'does not interest us because it was, but because in a certain sense it still is' (cited in Jauss, 1982, p. 59, and see Jauss, 1989, pp. 28–9). The fundamental question of aesthetics, according to Wolfgang Iser, the other leading contemporary German reception theorist, concerns 'how it happens that a . . . text born under the conditions of a specific historical situation can outlast that situation and maintain its freshness and its impact in different historical circumstances' (Iser, 1979, p. 14).

While many diverse contemporary theories can variously explain the compulsions that animate the exchange between the work of art and its beholders (even its scholarly ones), reception aesthetics addresses these most fundamental questions. How do works become intelligible to those who *write* about them? Where does the process of historiographic invention begin? Even if the time is clearly past for believing either that visual imagery or empirical historiographic research can yield an unmediated access to a world of past phenomena, it is nevertheless the case that some stories of the past seem to match their artefacts and periods better than others. Why? How do figural patterns of meaning intrinsic to the work become extrinsic? What is the recipient's role in completing art as a performance? In what ways do the rhetorical conventions of the work of art enunciate powerful conventions of reading and writing? In short, what is the process that perpetually unfixes the apparently stable relationship between subject and object, perceiver and perceived, present and past? The problem for our purposes as art historians is that the interrogative stance of reception theory is so often generated from a literary quandary. But works of visual art frame time and space in a way that works of literature do not. If we are intent on interrogating how modes of vision predetermine the historical look, how meaning can actually be visual rather than textual, how history writing can be specular, rather than linguistic, then as art historians, we must eventually take these ideas in a different direction. The German art historian, Wolfgang Kemp, has attempted to do just that. Arguing that the old tried-and-true art historical analyses of content and style have become bankrupt, Kemp suggests that a turn to reception theory can open new theoretical doors for the discipline. His thesis is direct:

if, in the present, 'the work of art and the beholder come together under mutually imbricated spatial and temporal conditions', no matter what the original context, then it follows that just as

> . . . the beholder approaches the work of art, the work of art approaches him, responding to and recognising the activity of his perception. What he will find first is a contemplating figure on the other side of the divide. This recognition, in other words, is the most felicitous pointer to the most important premise of reception aesthetics: namely, that the function of beholding has already been incorporated into the work itself. (Kemp, 1998, p. 181)

Kemp's particular insight is one born of a commitment to reception aesthetics. Even though I too am convinced that its implications for art history are richest from that particular angle, reception theory, to be fair, is broader than that.

Origins and Development

For this anthology devoted to critical reflection on the nature of theory itself, then, a straightforward historiographic review of the wider field would seem to be in order. Even though it had an academic origin (at the University of Constanz in 1963) and its German editorial institutionalization (the journal *Poetik und Hermeneutik* commencing in the same year), reception theory is not so much a unified school of thought as a disparate collection of primarily literary critics with a common starting point: a refutation of the commitment to the aesthetic object as primary (see Rabinowitz, 1994, p. 606; Suleiman and Grossman, 1980; and Paul de Man's *Introduction to Jauss*, 1982). And in this conviction, it meets its first resistance from many art historians. A work of literature in the view of reception theorists is predominantly an experience and only secondarily a work of art. Unwilling to accept the banishment of the reader from the realm of meaning-construction, Iser and Jauss, among others, including many American academics – Stanley Fish, Michael Riffaterre, Jane Tompkins, Norman Holland, to name only a noted few – are nevertheless nearly as anti-essentialist in their commitment to the fluidity of interpretation as are their contemporary deconstructionists:

> Theories of reading demonstrate the impossibility of establishing well-grounded distinctions between fact and interpretation, between what can be read in the text and what is read into it. . . . There must always be dualisms: an interpreter and something to interpret, a subject and an object, an actor and something he acts upon or that acts on him. (Culler, 1982, p. 75)

There are two major alternatives available under the general rubric of reception theory: reception history (exemplified most prominently by the more sociologi-

cal work of Jauss) and reception aesthetics (associated with the more formalist project of Iser) (see Kemp, 1989, 1985b and 1994, pp. 364–7). For the past couple of decades, *reception history* has set itself the task of reintroducing the question of history into literary criticism. While granting that any aesthetic 'masterpiece' once came into existence in a specific historical moment and therefore continues to carry the charge of its origin into its present reception, Jauss, a student of Hans-Georg Gadamer and phenomenology, substitutes the reader's experience for the authority of either the text or its author. Yet this readerly experience is circumscribed by time. There is no such thing as an eternal meaning: 'A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence' (Jauss, 1982, p. 21). 'A work does not have an inherent meaning; it does not speak, as it were, it only answers' (Culler, 1981, p. 54). From this point of view, the meaning of a work (by extension, visual as well as verbal) can only lie in the power of answers it gives to questions posited by what Jauss, after Husserl, calls a horizon of expectations, *Erwartungshorizont*.

Rather than a distant horizon line, this horizon of expectations needs visually to be conceived as an immediate backdrop, a kind of historical stage set against which the work is illuminated, poised to engage its prospective spectators. As the horizon of expectation metamorphoses through time, different aspects of the work in front of it will come into view for different historical audiences.[1] The receptive traits of these subject communities can be historically investigated, whether they be based in class, gender and ethnicity, for example, or derived from the ideological and biographical mechanisms of educational and political and spiritual positioning (Jauss, 1976, p. 141). The work only becomes actualized – a fusion of two historical horizons, those of its history and its audience consummated – at the moment of its reception by a community of viewers. The model is one of production and consumption: 'In the triangle of author, work and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but rather itself an energy formative of history. The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees' (Jauss, 1982, p. 19). For Jauss, works of art are important after the fact, not in their origination. Reception *history*, in other words, is based on the historical context of *explicit* readers. On this point, Jauss spins reception history's pivotal contrast with the central heuristic tool of reception aesthetics, the 'implied reader'.

This is where the work of Jauss's colleague, Wolfgang Iser, steps in, for Iser is explicitly concerned with the work's implicit strategies for preparing its own afterlife. *Reception aesthetics*, in short, defines reception as 'the recipient's production of the aesthetic object along structural and functional lines laid down in the text' (Iser, 1979, p. 19). The looming presence of the work of art, with its own controlling expectations of its implicit reader's role, casts a long shadow across the receiver's horizon of expectations: 'Once the reader is entangled, his own preconceptions are continually overtaken, so that the text becomes his "present" while his own ideas fade into the "past"' (Iser, 1980a, pp. 64–5).

Worried that the concentration on the patterning strategies of the literary text (an analysis which he carries on with a number of historical examples) might too easily slip into a formulaic formalism in the hands of either his disciples or his detractors, Iser routinely issues phenomenological caveats about the reading process. In no way is his implied reader (a fabrication of the text) to be confused with the real reader, who exists in a time and place often far removed (see Koerner, 1993, p. 536). Similarly, the literary work cannot be glibly identified with its actualization in the mind of a recipient (see Freund, 1987, p. 142). Hence its odd status: its principal characteristic is its 'peculiar halfway position between the external world of objects and the reader's own world of experience' (Iser, 1989, p. 8). When the two halves come together, 'virtual' meaning, or the realm of text's imaginary, is what emerges: 'the coming together of text and imagination' (Iser, 1980a, p. 54). Working hard at having it both ways, Iser turns at times to a metaphor crucial to hermeneutics, the 'fusion' of horizons between the past experience embodied in the text and the present situatedness of the reader, and at other times to the concept of a 'guided interaction' between object and subject, initiated by graphic 'structures' in the text which possess the 'nature of pointers or instructions' (see Iser, 1979, pp. 5, 14; 1989, pp. 29–30).

One of the most telling arrangements within the text, which is regarded as capable of prestructuring the aesthetic reaction its reader (or its scholar) will have, is the presence of gaps or strategic blanks whose ultimate purpose is to arrest his or her wandering viewpoint by defamiliarizing the familiar. (The arresting of the 'wandering viewpoint' is a term used by several reception theorists.) Disconcerting shifts in perspective or voice, for example, can suddenly trigger the reader's engagement by thwarting his or her expectations, a thesis reminiscent of Gombrich's discussion of the 'beholder's share' (Gombrich, 1961). The emergent meaning, even though Iser operates exclusively with the literary, must be grasped as what he calls 'an image (that) provides the filling for what the textual pattern structures but leaves out'.[2] Construing the process of reading as imagistic pattern-making in terms of perspectives, blanks, etc., is an agenda that can be traced back through much of phenomenological thinking, with Gadamer's 'horizon' as everything that can be seen as *visible* from a privileged *viewpoint* as only one particularly suggestive example (Gadamer, cited in Iser, 1978, p. 111).

Given this more-than-metaphorical predisposition towards visual thinking underlying so much of phenomenology and its pragmatic derivative, reception theory, it is curious why so little of contemporary art historical theory has seen fit to make use of pertinent interpretative tenets. Jauss and Iser have no difficulty in relating – although almost as an afterthought – to the work of Gombrich; for art historians, the reverse rarely holds. Granted, Wolfgang Kemp in Germany, especially, and in the United States Michael Fried and, more recently, Joseph Koerner, have manoeuvred around inside the reception paradigm in order to account for the way in which works of art from different historical periods anticipate their ideal relationship with their viewers, but the historiographical examples are far from numerous (see Kemp 1985a and b). Of course, this is not

to say that theoretical art history pays no attention to internal gazes, compositional strategies, rhetorical tactics, etc., for eliciting patterned responses from prospective spectators. Yet the route most frequently taken for explaining the exchanges between historical objects and historical subjects in the so-called 'new art history' is a psychoanalytic one, securing its modes of analysis either in Lacanian theory, or in a Foucauldian sense of the *mise-en-abîme*. The studies of Norman Bryson, Mieke Bal, Lucien Dallenbach and Claude Gandelman are appropriate examples here. Even though it might be claimed that these works are themselves evidence of a kind of linguistic imperialism, i.e. the colonization of images by words, in this case of art history by literary theory (or a corner of it as embodied in reception theory), I have been arguing in this chapter that something far more subtle is going on. Far from getting lost to the word, powerful images get inside words and help to determine their choice, as well as what they have to say.

It would take a return to a much earlier German scholar, Alois Riegl, whose work at the turn of the twentieth century has been identified by some critics as an intellectual progenitor of reception theory, to begin to excavate the historiographic links between verbal and visual reception theory. Especially germane, as a recent biographer of Riegl has noted, is his concept of the psychological disposition of 'attentiveness' embodied in visual depiction. With the aid of this interpretative category, he attempted to explain the Dutch genius for coherence evident in the genre of group portraiture, and the ways in which the unification of the depicted figures is accomplished not only by their concerted attention within the painting, but also by their attention to the solicitation of the spectator outside (see Riegl, 1931, and Iversen, 1993). Rereading Riegl, in fact, might provoke the question that Jauss asked in another context: 'whether the history of art, which is usually regarded as a dependent "poor relative" of general history, might not once have been the head of the family, and might not once again become a paradigm of historical knowledge'. Lest one misinterpret his eulogistic sentiments, however, Jauss's subsequent attack on the intellectual poverty of art history is scathingly unambiguous: 'Under historicism . . . art history handed over lock, stock, and barrel its legitimacy as a medium for aesthetic, philosophical, or hermeneutic reflection' (Jauss, 1982, pp. 48–51).

How fair is this indictment? Indeed, if reference to reception theory is the measure (not to mention deconstruction), it is the case that mainstream Anglo-American art history has remained largely impervious to certain European theoretical insights developed over the past three decades. This is not necessarily a regrettable state of affairs, provided that the discipline has its reasons for closing its ranks beyond the hackneyed claims of empiricist research. Even though reception theorists have written almost exclusively about literary works, their commitment to reading 'imagistically' would seem to open up all sorts of possibilities for a field of inquiry devoted to the history of images. For the most part, it has not. Unless it is a rejection born of ignorance, the legitimation for

dismissing this approach has had to come from somewhere else, perhaps in response to the cogency of critiques within literary criticism itself.

The gist of these reviews can be reduced to one paradoxical complaint: reception theory is both too flexible and too rigid. According to Stanley Fish, it is this kind of ambiguity which accounts for the fact that 'no one's afraid of Wolfgang Iser':

> His theory is mounted on behalf of the reader, but it honors the intentions of the authors; the aesthetic object is constructed in time, but the blueprint for its construction is spatially embodied; each realisation of the blueprint is hist orical and unique; but it itself is given once and for all; . . . The theory, in short, has something for everyone, and denies legitimacy to no one. (Fish, 1989, p. 74)

Determinacy and indeterminacy exist on both sides of the equation. To Iser's critics that presents a problem; to feminist critics, for example, who justifiably might ask, just who is this ideal, implied reader, and in what does this so-called naturalized category of experience and disposition consist? (see, ironically, Culler, 1982, pp. 42–88).

Conclusion

The question then becomes whether the dynamism of the situation generates an inhibiting or a creative paradox for the discipline of art history. For Iser the answer might be simple. What happens between writer and reader, artist and spectator, he has emphasized in response to his critics, is a 'seducing, tempting, exasperating, affirming and pleasing . . . game' (Iser, 1980, p. 20). Some observers of the contest might concentrate on one player; others on another. The text or work of art is process; the reading or looking is processing, and neither is independent of the other.

To the stock criticism that it descends into an obdurate determinism, reception aesthetics has at the ready a repertoire of carefully worded responses, all of which can be paraphrased for the purposes of detecting reciprocity between work of art and spectator, objecthood and subjectivity. Semantic meaning will always remain far richer than rhetorical meaning. The meaning that a work accrues through time will always exceed its originating rhetoric. The text is timeless; having left the past, it is for evermore destined to exist in the present. The work is stable (even though it may contain a variety of meanings within itself), its interpretation always in flux. Different readers at differing times will always experience different apprehensions. The text is not the ending of a process, but the beginning of one (see Iser, 1980a, p. 60).

Yet, in the end, as it was in the beginning, the process of reading, says Iser, is like looking into the darkened sky at night:

> two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The 'stars' in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable. The author of the text may, of course, exert plenty of influence on the reader's imagination – he has the whole panoply of narrative techniques at his disposal – but no author worth his salt will ever attempt to set the *whole* picture before his reader's eyes. If he does, he will very quickly lose his reader, for it is only by activating the reader's imagination that the author can hope to involve him and so realise the intentions of his text. (Iser, 1980, p. 70)

It is worth remembering, of course, that the illumination from old stars is the only light that enables us to look into the dark and distant past. Visual intention is as good a term as any other for the magnetic pull the stellar bodies of the artistic past still exert upon the satellites of historical understanding that keep circling round them. Like the light emanating from a distant star, what is present has come from a place and time that still resonates, and what is past is not necessarily so. 'The spectator', said Hegel in the *Aesthetics*, 'is . . . in it from the beginning, is counted in with it, and the work exists only for this fixed point, i.e. for the individual apprehending it' (Hegel, 1975, vol. 2, pp. 805–6).

Now even if the time is certainly past for being able to claim that either visual imagery or historiographic expertise can ever offer unmediated access to the world of past phenomena, as I argued earlier, it is reception aesthetics' insight into the implicit patterning strategies within the work that seems to be most suggestive for thinking about the relationship between past objects and, in particular, the historians in the present who write about them. By comparison, we could argue that the cues for initiating an exchange between a picture, say, and an historian (i.e. objecthood and subjectivity) lurk within the arrangement and motifs of the pictorial composition. The objects, in other words, inevitably pre-date their subjects. While certainly not claiming that the work of art possesses some unchanging ontological status, I will go so far, following Iser, as to argue that a view's (even an art historian's) relation to a work of art is prescribed, assigned in advance by a system of representation which I would call 'rhetorical'. Any later commentator, it should go without saying, brings with her or him a host of contemporary preoccupations which interact with the rhetorical mandates of what she or he is looking at. Reciprocity is critical. However, historians, as a special species of the genus spectator, cannot help but react to the interrogation that the past puts us through, the proposition that a work of art puts before us. Looking at times past is never a simple chronological act. Always and forever, the figural imagination has been there before us. And if we 'see' the past at all, it is in large part because it has yielded unto us the images with which to look (and write).[3]

Notes

1 The links with Gombrich's concept of 'the beholder's share', 'making and matching' and the falsification hypothesis in *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of*

Pictorial Representation, 2nd rev. edn (Princeton University Press, 1961) are explicit, most likely because both Jauss and Iser trace their intellectual ancestry, in part, through the philosopher of science, Karl Popper. 'For progress in science', Jauss says, 'as for that in the experience of life, the most important moment is the "disappointment of expectations": It resembles the experience of a blind person, who runs into an obstacle and thereby experiences its existence. Through the falsification of our assumptions we actually make contact with "reality"' (*Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* 1982) pp. 40–1, citing Popper's 'Natural laws and theoretical systems', *Theorie und Realität*, H. Albert, (ed.), Tübingen, 1964, pp. 87–102.

2 Cited in Freund, 1987, p. 142 from Iser's *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, p. 9. '"Imagistic" in character,' says Freund, 'meaning is dependent upon the reader's imagination.'

3 Much of this chapter appears in scattered form in my book (Holly, 1996). An extended example of the implications of reception theory for art history can be found in the discussion of Jacob Burckhardt in chapter 2 of that work.

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Chapter 37

The Paradox of Creative Interpretation in Art

Carl Hausman

What has led art critics to talk and write about works of art? Why not enjoy the works and leave it at that? One answer is that the motive for art criticism is fundamentally the inclination to show others what we admire. The attempt to go beyond pointing in cases of works of art, however, is not easy. One reason is that it seems unsatisfactory to stop, once one has noticed the artwork to which attention has been called. We, or at least some of us, continue to focus, peruse detail, and interpret. Interpretation may be haphazard – for example, by jumping from discriminating colors, textures, or patterns to comparing representational images found in most, if not all, works of art with what is represented.

The persistence of viewing and interpretation is not surprising if we accept the conception of the most compelling works of art as coherent organizations of visual qualities. Such works challenge one to continue attending to that organization. In any case, as casual as our interpretive responses may be, they can be organized in layers or strata of interpretation. They begin with a direct and unmediated experience, an unreflective response, which is immediately felt, but as yet is a verbally unexpressed admiration (or aversion). Thus, I may unexpectedly encounter a Cézanne Mont Sainte-Victoire painting that I had never seen and react with surprise, enjoyment, and wonder. However, I see after a moment or two that the power of the painting to prompt an immediate experience of satisfaction is a result of the special character of the painting. I then act on the inclination to understand what appears visually exciting. I am led to interpretations and descriptions (although the latter are not pure or entirely devoid of interpretive increments). The particular form these responses may take, of course, depends on one's culture and the contingencies of one's receptive and critical capacities.

A Basic Interpretive Approach

For the purposes of my comments, I want to consider one interpretive response: a broadened conception of what I shall call Formalism, which, I think, suggests most directly why figurative language is the most adequate way to approach works of art themselves. More specifically, I want to consider why metaphorical language is needed to interpret artworks that are creative achievements. This consideration will be followed by a suggestion about the peculiar relationship between metaphors in criticism and the works to which they are applied. Finally, I shall briefly suggest that there is an ontological condition that grounds the appropriateness of interpretations to interpreted works. What, then, is broadened Formalism?

Formalist interpretations seem to exemplify the closest interpretive layer circumscribing the work. The formalist approach, as I conceive it, refers to and analyzes visual qualities and their relations, including line, color, shape texture, expressive aspects, and, if present, representational images. Thus, a critic may interpret by attending directly to the work itself. He or she may, for example, point out how a Cézanne painting of Mont Sainte-Victoire builds the mountain shape with distinct ranges of blue, orange, and green patches that work together to enhance the sense of lively solidity and strength and the rising of the mountain in conjunction with the solidity of its mass as it dominates the visual field. It must be emphasized that a Formalist approach need not be confined to "disinterested" properties or what may be regarded as nonrepresentational content or qualities. I assume an enriched organicist conception for which so-called content or subject matter and expressive meaning are components of the organic integration of the work. My point in saying that Formalist criticism is closest to the work, then, is that the focus of attention is first on what appears in the work – colors, lines, texture, images, all appearing as mutually interactive and serving as the initial key or prompting condition for expressed meaning, which, as I have suggested, also must be regarded as interactive with the other components. In such interpretations, the references to visual qualities may be instrumental to saying something about the artist's personality or about his or her intentions (artistic or aesthetic). But the latter are only relevant to the work itself insofar as attention is directed back to the "man as artist," as Benedetto Croce put it, or toward the agent's functioning as artist.

As I have indicated, I want to consider how interpretations must, under certain circumstances, depend in part on figurative language when attention is turned to the structure and qualities of the works. In particular, I want to emphasize that one species of figurative language, metaphor, is indispensable in cases of works of art that exhibit creativity and thus may be properly called *creations*. I do not have sufficient space to examine closely the notions of creativity and creations (see Dutton and Krausz, 1981; Hausman, 1984). However, as a brief indication of what it takes to be a creation, let me tie my own notion of creativity to Immanuel Kant's account of genius (Kant, 1951).

Genius

Unfortunately, the word "genius" is too often used thoughtlessly, both in common parlance and even in some professional literature. This is also the case for other words, specifically, "originality" and "metaphor." It is a mistake, and nearly as thoughtless as is much of the common use of these terms, to reject them from the vocabulary. In any case, more circumspect use of these terms indicates that they are indispensable for understanding artistic creativity.

The term "genius," as Kant explains it, is far from pointing to some mysterious source or irrational approach to what artists do in achieving masterpieces. The term need not refer to a divine or demonic power beyond human potentiality – a view that is, however, traced to one of Plato's dialogues that discusses creative expression (Plato, *The Ion*). For Kant, the term "genius" does not refer directly to a person who has a record of extraordinary achievements. Nor does it refer to wholly incomprehensible endowments. Genius is essentially a dynamic condition of self-generating activity – which I take it for Kant is part of a natural process of evolution. Genius is for Kant a principle or power, a source of new achievements that are significant enough to influence the future of the medium and tradition in which they occur. Thus, the work of genius does not exemplify a prior concept of what it is to be properly executed or of a rule to be followed. Genius yields something new in kind. As Kant put it, "*Genius* is the talent (or natural gift) which gives the rule to art" (Kant, 1951, pp. 46–7). An achievement is thus new when it exhibits sufficient differences in qualities and characteristics to be considered an unprecedented kind of thing or new way of being sensible and intelligible. Kant adds conditions or criteria that are crucial to understanding his point. One of these criteria is that a work of genius exhibit *originality*. Originality is simply the mark of a new genre, or the mark of a new way in which artworks are constructed as compared with past ways. An artist who accomplishes this is in the sense mentioned is originative. For Kant this shows that genius is the condition by which unprecedented and unpredictable styles – "rules," to use Kant's initial defining term, or new kinds of things showing new ways of painting, scupting, designing, etc. – are generated in the arts. A second condition is that a work of genius be *exemplary* and inspire future genius. Being exemplary, of course, is an explicit normative condition, indicating that a work having the mark of originality ought to have sufficient value to have an impact or influence on the future development of its genre. Both originality and exemplarity suggest that a creative work, or, more accurately, a work that is a creation, should mark an unprecedented change, an advance within a tradition, or in the most dramatic cases, it may initiate a new tradition, as the first instances of Impressionism did, or as Cubism did in moving beyond the work of Cézanne.

Kinds or styles that may exhibit originality and exemplarity are forms in the sense of being Gestalts, which are objects of attention that include more than their parts and even of their organization. Their Gestalts exemplify significance.

In using the term "significance," I do not intend to revive the notion of significant form, which might be associated with the thin sense of Formalism that I am not following. I do not mean that form should be considered without attention to its subject matter and expressiveness: even if as a pure abstraction, it is expressive. Artworks that have significant form have emotional and intellectual meanings – they offer insights. The issues that arise if one asks whether creations can be traced completely to past styles and conditions are complex, but I must let other discussions be my basis for avoiding the issues here.

The Challenge in Interpreting Creative Work

The challenge for the critic, however, lies in finding the most apt way to show what in the painting exhibits the creativity of the artist, or correlatively, what exhibits the marks of newness that contribute to the salient features of the work. Language appropriate for styles and individual paintings up to the emergence of the new form is not quite adequate to the demands of the new. Thus, not just figurative language (analogies, irony, etc.) but metaphors are appropriate, even necessary.

Contemporary theories of figurative language, especially of metaphor, owe a debt to Aristotle. Aristotle said that a metaphor gives a name to something that the thing is not. In more recent terms, a metaphor asserts something about something else to which the assertion taken literally does not apply. To say of a painting that it expresses a certain mood, that it has a rhythmic movement, that it reveals a personality, etc., is to say something of the painting that is properly, that is, normally, applied to objects external to the artwork such as physical objects in motion, or to human individuals. The painting does not "literally" match what is claimed of it. Even to say that a representational painting represents something makes use of a frozen metaphor, for the painting is not literally another existing presentation of something that exists or existed elsewhere. The transformation of the visual experience into a verbal experience in which words are used with the hope that they apply to the visual referent, then, seems, in Aristotle's view, to be a metaphorical relation.

There is a fundamental metaphor at the root of all attempts to talk or write about artworks. The contrast between the nonverbal, visual referent of experience and the verbal naming and description of it consists of words expressing a reaction to visual qualities. This level of interpretation refers the reaction back through verbal language to the prompting, nonverbal object. Such reference by verbal language must consist in a kind of indirect pointing rather than an attempt to give a direct description that is a map of or a correlation with the intricacies (and novelty) of the thing to be described. Nor, obviously, is interpreting art translating from one verbal language into another. Thus, the effort to "get at" the artwork through the different medium of verbal language in itself requires the response to the fundamental metaphorical relation of all verbal language –

what is said in words must be correlated with what is experienced in a wordless configuration.[1]

To be sure, this relation is present in all verbal interpretations – even all purportedly pure descriptions – of nonverbal things, which incorporate some degree of interpretive increments. My concern here, however, is with the relation between the verbal and nonverbal in art where the contrast is most evident, because nonverbal art works have their own intrinsic visual features that are or can be relished independently of externally expressed verbal interpretations.

The approach to metaphors that is based on the Aristotelian conception, however, does not yet do full justice to their power to be creative and to refer to the way paintings show originality. To see this, metaphors should be distinguished from analogies, although analogies may include, indeed sometimes depend upon, metaphors. Analogies, at least as commonly interpreted, amount to elliptical similes that may be simply literal comparisons that can be paraphrased without loss of meaning in other, established descriptive ways – and depending on previously known similarities. For instance, "He eats like a pig" is formally a simile. It may be interpreted as the analogy, "His eating habits are analogous to those of a pig." And this may be paraphrased as "He is a sloppy eater." The presumed simile then says nothing that could not have been said "literally" (assuming that the so-called literal paraphrase does not itself depend on frozen or "dead" metaphors). A creative metaphor, in contrast, is not thus paraphrasable. "Man is the shadow of a dream," for instance, eludes a straightforward literal paraphrase; its meaning is not exhausted by a series of comparisons – humans are fragile, unreal, superficial, etc. Let me then propose three criteria for metaphors that should show the sense in which metaphors are not simply comparisons. Yet because linguistic expressions can be mixed with respect to functions, some expressions involving various kinds of figures of speech, the criteria had best be referred to as distinguishing the metaphorical *aspects* of various kinds of figurative expressions.

Metaphors and Interactionism

The criteria in question depend on an interactionist theory of metaphor (which will be characterized below) rather than a form of the comparison theory, which at bottom sees metaphors as fundamentally identical with analogies.

The criteria for metaphors that advance meanings beyond established vocabularies and usage are (a) interaction between at least two key terms or meaning units – what Max Black has called primary and secondary subjects (Black, 1977); (b) a dissonance or tension between the presumed literal meanings of the key terms and their apparent violation of these meanings when they are connected in the attribution of one to the other taken "literally" or "conventionally"; and (c) the meaning units interact (in light of their previously understood meanings) and yield an emerging third meaning that is not reducible to either or both of

the two or more conflicting so-called literal meanings (Richards, 1936). It should be noted that the two meaning units referred to in the statement of the first criterion are complexes of meanings. It is also crucial to notice that expressions satisfying these criteria ought not to be subjected to strongly literal demands, which seem to come from a commitment to the assumption that spontaneity, or the emergence or deviation from what is regularly expected, is a purely random event. New rules, new laws, new forms, or new ways of thinking are outcomes of accidents or mutations and thus metaphorical language that exhibits spontaneity or deviations from what was rational in the past, and which has unpredicted and unexpected but intelligible outcomes are looked on with suspicion. This is a continuation of the standard view of the tradition, namely, that metaphorical language is unstable or untrustworthy and that rationality demands the literal use of words.

In any case, if the work interpreted exhibits emerged meaning that is new, unprecedented, and significant or insightful, then the interpretation must rise to its subject and point us creatively to the created aspect of the work. The interpretation must depend on metaphors so that it also exhibits creativity. But this point raises the paradox of creative interpretation.

How can one creation (verbal interpretation) that yields new meaning be relevant to another (nonverbal) visual creation that yields its own new meaning? How can creative criticism or interpretation do its job? Is creative criticism necessarily departing from good criticism? Is there an objective condition that can account for the appropriateness of the interpretation for the original creative or created achievement?

Whatever the condition of appropriateness, the interpretation should show what is newly significant in the work, even though the expression is in a different, verbal, medium. Ideally, the verbal creation offered by the metaphor has a unique structure that the interpreter discerns and relates to another, "parallel", unique structure in the artwork. Of course, what it is to be parallel in associating unique things is at issue. The interpreted work, however, bears one similarity with its verbal interpretation. Its organization exhibits the structure of verbal metaphors: visually meaningful qualities related in various degrees of tension and newly emergent visual significance. Thus, the parallelism might be thought of as an analogy between two metaphors in different media. At the same time, the parallelism cannot properly be an analogy in the common interpretation of analogies. If it were, it seems, the more it succeeded as an analogy, the more it would diminish the uniqueness of each of its poles, for it would succeed by identifying common properties, not what is unique in each. To be successful as an interpretation that points to what is creative, the interpretation necessarily eludes reduction to a common property of similarity. It will be helpful to pursue these questions with an example and several additional considerations.

Even in a book intended for summary reading, Giuseppe Gatt's brief reference to the Turner painting, *Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway*, illustrates an apt figure of speech: "the train appears and disappears in the wind

and rain like a mythical beast of modern times, . . .” Gatt here introduces a simile that is based on a metaphor: the train is a mythical beast (Gatt, 1967, p. 38). It should be noted that, because of the term “like” in Gatt’s statement, we have formally an analogy. The metaphorical term that results from the condensed simile, “the train is a beast,” however, is a metaphorical foundation for the simile. The simile is comparable to the simile, “Man is like a wolf.” (Note that everything is like everything else in some respect, and the similes fail to say how the man is *like* a wolf or a train is *like* a beast.) Such similes, however, are based on a more “primitive” figure of speech, the metaphorical form. This alerts the reader to an interactive relation of the complex meanings of “beast” and “train.” The meanings of “beast” and “train” are changed (through interrelated associated meanings) when joined. In both the verbal metaphor and the visual metaphor, trains are “animalized” (note that it is left open as to what kind of animal the train might be) and beasts are mechanized. And the target, the visual metaphor, intensifies, vivifies, and thus contributes to an insight into the image of the train and its dynamic context of shadow, color, and light.

The Dynamic Relation of Creation to Creation

As already mentioned, the more successful a creative interpretation is as a creative achievement, the less it can simply echo the original. The more successful it is in duplicating as it “points” us back to the original, the less creative is the interpretation. Indeed, at least in the visual arts, the second would then seem to become increasingly an imitation. The task is to interpret with attention to the way the tensions and interaction among the main meaning units (major subjects) contribute to the whole work and its emerging meaning(s). But the interpretation should be creative with respect to tensions and interaction of its unique qualities and its own origination of emerging meanings. Finally, the interpretation and its target should both exhibit parallel instances of significance. A creative interpretation of Picasso’s *Guernica* that helps us attend to the way the mural achieves its created aspect and its value should creatively somehow exhibit the meaning of war as this meaning is individualized in the mural. But if the interpretation is a creation, it will, in its own uniqueness, indicate the meaning of war.

I believe that the way to reconcile these two alternatives and to assuage the paradox of creative criticism lies at least theoretically in the relation between interpretation and work – in a kind of bridge by which two unique artistic Gestalts and their creative insights in a special sense share a crucial binding relation while each maintains its own integrity as a creation. This would constitute a genuine integration. On the one hand, the link between the metaphorical creative interpretation and a creative work by Cézanne in which new meanings were generated – the bridging link, for instance, between the idea of plasticity of elements and architectonic compositional structure and a Cézanne painting – is not

a relation that was already established. On the other hand, the link itself could not be completely new and unique, for it would then depend on two more links, bridging itself first with the interpretation and bridging itself second with the work and so on infinitum. The link must constitute a special mode of analogy. I shall only briefly attempt an account of what I mean.

The analogical relation between interpretation and interpreted first must be proportional, a relation that is a common ratio between two unique relata, just as in the proportion, 4 is to 8 as 9 is to 18. The poles are individually completely autonomous except for the relations among their components. Thus, the interpretation that includes a reference to an architectonic character of a Cézanne painting of Mont Sainte-Victoire makes use of a ratio: the image of Mont Sainte-Victoire in its context is to the form of the painting as an architectural structure is to its environment. Of course, this bit of interpretation is only a part of an extended interpretation. For instance, the interpreting metaphor would properly be strengthened and supported by an account of the antecedent stylistic influences on Cézanne and the differences that Cézanne created. Such an account might include references to the other approaches to interpretation. But the interpretation in its entirety would gravitate around the main proportional analogies between ideas and visual qualities. These underlie the parallelism between the two unique creations that pose the paradox of creative interpretation. Much more needs to be explored in order to test and develop my proposal. I can only hope that is worth pursuing.

Let me make one final suggestion – which I have space only to mention. What is the condition of aptness that constrains both the artist and the interpreter as they generate their works? The constraints must lie in a dynamic extralinguistic (verbal and nonverbal) condition that is common to interpretation and work. This is the truth or reality that is grasped as a shared insight – what Cézanne wanted to find in "realizing nature." It is the condition for the aptness of interpretations of the work.

Finally, in conclusion, let me condense the main points of the discussion. The professional interpreter, the historian or the critic, faces the demanding challenge of creating new ways of showing verbally what is admired as "creative." To succeed in this task, the interpreter contends with the paradox of creative interpretation: to create a verbal meaning that is unique but that must give access to a nonverbal meaning that is itself unique. Success assumes a special apt analogical relation between the unique structural demands of the interpretation and the unique structural demands of the work interpreted. In turn, the aptness of the interpretation for the work depends on an extralinguistic source of constraints.

Note

1 Michael Baxandall offers numerous insights into the problem of the language of art history. I think, however, that he does not focus sufficiently on the special structure and function of metaphors.

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Chapter 38

Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture

Charlotte Klonk

In recent years, art history has been seen by many of its practitioners as a discipline in crisis.[1] Critics have identified two fundamental weaknesses in the subject. Firstly, traditional art history has been criticized for upholding a rigid canon of great masters (who turn out – not accidentally, many of those critics would say – to be just those artists who fetch the highest prices in the market) and in so doing excluding a spectrum of other visual productions that are, in fact, equally significant for the study of cultures. A second line of criticism is that traditional art history, with its concentration on stylistic and iconographic analysis, has been narrow and inward-looking and that it could, with advantage, draw on the insights and methods of other disciplines. These criticisms form an important part of the background to the recent growth of interest in interdisciplinarity among art historians. Indeed, in the minds of many, the two criticisms are connected: the conception of art history as the study of visual culture requires and promotes an interdisciplinary approach, as witness the following quotation from the Introduction to *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations* by Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey:

> The transformation of the history of art into a history of images may be seen as one of the consequences of the theoretical and methodological developments that have affected other disciplines in the humanities. These transformations mean that the cultural work of the history of art will more closely resemble that of other fields than has been the case in the past. It offers the prospect of an interdisciplinary dialogue, one that is more concerned with the relevance of contemporary values for academic study than with the myth of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. (Bryson, Holly and Moxey, 1994, p. xvii)

The approach to art history against which Bryson, Holly and Moxey were reacting was the Formalism promoted in the 1950s by two celebrated American advocates of high Modernism, Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Similar criticisms of art history as an enclosed, self-referential discipline were being made at the same time in continental Europe. In the latter case, however, the

critics' targets were art history's German-speaking founding fathers. Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin, in particular, were attacked for their adoption of a Formalist conception of art history, derived from Kantian or Hegelian aesthetics. In so doing, it was argued, they had closed off the possibility of establishing art history as a critical, interdisciplinary subject (Belting, 1987, pp. 13–22).

Against this, it is my contention here that art history has, in fact, never not been an interdisciplinary subject. From its inception in the early nineteenth century, art history has repeatedly turned to other disciplines for methodological guidance. Art history's more connoisseurial practitioners (by which I mean those whose prime interest has been in using historical data in order to establish the provenance of individual works of art) borrowed methods from the empirical procedures of textual analysis in comparative philology, while those, like Riegl and Wölfflin, who attempted to establish a more systematic kind of history of art, based themselves variously on philosophy, psychology, or the hermeneutic method advocated by contemporary historians, such as Wilhelm Dilthey. As the quotation from Bryson, Holly and Moxey shows, contemporary advocates of art history as an interdisciplinary investigation of visual cultures are committed to the idea that art works, far from being embodiments of transcendental aesthetic values are deeply embedded within the cultures which produce them. And yet this emphasis on the historical specificity of cultural products leads to a fundamental hermeneutic problem. How art could be at the same time something historically and socially specific, and something capable of being appreciated by an interpreter from a cultural vantage point outside its original context was one of the central problems for all the systematic histories of art developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Moreover, it is the interdisciplinary aspect of art history which forms, I shall argue, its Achilles' heel. Far from leading out of a methodological cul-de-sac, calls for interdisciplinarity do not offer a solution in themselves; on the contrary, they lead to difficult methodological problems. What nowadays seems idealist, reductive or simplistic in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century histories of art was merely the outcome of attempts to address this vulnerable aspect. Within an empirical enterprise which is content merely to give low-level accounts of how particular visual artefacts are part of the culture which produced them, causal links can always be established on a limited scale. There is no methodological difference here between what art historians did at the beginning of the nineteenth century – for example, Johann David Passavant's account of the context of Raphael's work – and contemporary approaches which broaden the canon to include other popular imagery without reflecting on the conditions of interpretative understanding and notions of historical change. When, however, it is claimed, as Bryson, Holly and Moxey do, that contemporary values should be critically reflected against past productions, then a theoretical position is necessary regarding the possibility of assessing what is historically specific from a viewpoint outside it. In other words, it is necessary to address the discontinuity between experience and the object of experience.

In what follows I will discuss the interdisciplinary moves made by some of the most influential approaches to art history in dealing with this hermeneutic problem. It will become clear that in the majority of cases the solution is provided by an interdisciplinary strategy which, at the same time, is supposed to account for art's social embeddedness. Thus the twofold postulate within calls for interdisciplinarity (that art be seen as merely one part of a society's total cultural creation, and that interpretation be informed by the theoretical insights of other disciplines) will emerge as interdependent.

Interdisciplinarity in the History of Art History

Until the end of the eighteenth century art history was not historical at all in the modern sense. That is: history was seen to be extrinsic to art in the way that earthquakes are extrinsic to it. Art's value lay in aspiring to timeless aesthetic norms, systematically elaborated by late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century French art theorists. Two new notions became widespread at the end of the eighteenth century which allowed art to be seen as intrinsically historical. Firstly, art came to be seen as an intrinsic expression of individual societies and civilizations and considered as unique to them. This was the implication of Johann Winckelmann's *History of the Art of Antiquity* as interpreted by Johann Gottfried Herder (Winckelmann himself, somewhat incongruously, still held to an understanding of classical art as an embodiment of a universal moral idea) (Potts, 1994, pp. 27–9). Secondly, a systematic understanding of the connection between these individual expressions had to be elaborated, an understanding which explained the differences and similarities between different cultures' art works. Only with this in place did an understanding of art as developmental emerge, one which could constitute a history. This was advanced by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in his celebrated lectures on aesthetics delivered in Berlin between 1817 and 1829 and published posthumously in 1835–8.

Hegel understood art as being always of its own time. However, in order to give an account of the differences between the art works produced in different societies and to identify a developmental logic between them the possibility of a universal, inclusive viewpoint was required. This was famously provided in Hegel's case by his notion of the universal spirit, *Geist*. It was *Geist*, for Hegel, that both provided the connection between all the diverse expressions of a society and gave the impetus to progressive development over time. *Geist* connected art to other forms of cultural production and opened a vantage point from which past and present could be connected. Hegel's *Geist* has often been criticized as providing a highly simplistic account of how art is part of the culture from which it originates. Hegel himself, however, was very aware that more was needed to show how different cultural expressions are interdependent than a superficial appeal to the 'spirit of the age':

> It is usually said that one should consider the politics of a society, its religion etc. [i.e. art] because they have exercised a considerable influence on the Philosophy of the time, and that the latter in turn influences the former. But if one is happy with such loose categories as 'considerable influence' then all one does is put each aspect of a culture in a superficial relationship and, moreover, assumes that all of them are independent entities.[2]

Although Hegel's philosophy of historical progress stayed extremely influential, most art historians during the nineteenth century did not accept his claims for the existence of *Geist* as a metaphysical driving force. What remained was a notion of art understood as an expression of its age. Yet, even within such apparently more modest accounts, problems surfaced. One art historian who was committed to the idea that art was an expression of its age was John Ruskin. Ruskin saw the decline of architecture and sculpture in Venice after 1423 as an expression of the decline of the city from wealth and power. He could give no explanation, however, for the fact that Tintoretto was still able to produce such powerful pictures as *The Crucifixion* in St Rocco a century and a half later (Haskell, 1993, p. 325). In order to avoid such problems other art historians left behind Hegel's simple model of art as a direct expression of its culture. Starting with Karl Schnaase, these art historians adopted an alternative model of the history of art as an internal development which in turn affects its society (Podro, 1982, pp. 31–43). The dilemma inherent in both conceptualizations of the relationship between art and culture was astutely summed up by the historian Jakob Burckhardt, whose work was so seminal for debates regarding art's place in the wider culture:

> How far the later art is the manifestation of a new project on the part of the artist, or of those represented and their social level, or how far it is a combination of the two, one has to decide in each particular case. (Quoted in Podro, 1982, p. 116)

It was Riegl's and Wölfflin's achievement to provide histories of art which would address these methodological problems self-consciously. Both were concerned to show art works as deeply embedded in their specific cultures and expressive of them. But they also held to the idea that art can, in turn, be formative for its society (not just reflective of it), something which many contemporary art historians have also emphasized. In the absence of a Hegelian metaphysics, how did Wölfflin and Riegl conceptualize art's historical specificity and its formative character? They both set themselves against what they perceived to be the narrowly empiricist connoisseurial art historians of their time. The problem, as they saw it, was to provide an account of art as a product of a wider culture while doing justice to individual agency. Wölfflin made this crystal-clear:

> What determines the artist's creative attitude to form? It has been said to be the character of the age he lives in; for the Gothic period, for instance, feudalism, scholasticism, the life of the spirit. But we still have to find the path that leads

> from the cell of the scholastic philosopher to the mason's yard. (Quoted in Podro, 1982, p. 100)

To find this path, both Wölfflin and Riegl looked to another discipline for an explanatory mechanism: psychology as it had been developed by Johann Friedrich Herbart earlier in the nineteenth century.

Herbart gave an account of mental activity which explained the mind's ordering of elements of experience into a systematic whole. According to Herbart, the mind receives individual and disparate presentations that must either be assimilated with past or present contiguous presentations or else, if they are too unfamiliar, be suppressed (Podro, 1972, pp. 61–79). Riegl adopted this account in order to provide a nonmetaphysical historical driving force behind artistic change, which he called *Kunstwollen*. This 'will to art' was, famously, not just limited to high art but determined all the visual creations of a culture (Iversen, 1993, pp. 3–18). It was based on Riegl's endorsement of Herbart's claim that human beings perceive the world around them by assimilating new sense data with familiar structures. Hence, transformations in the formal characteristics of art are the result of changes in people's perception brought about by the mind's tendency to synthesize an increasing range of concepts in ever more refined and ordered terms. In his writings from his *Stilfragen* (1893) to his *Die Spätrömische Kunstindustrie* (1901), Riegl discussed art as an expression of people's different relationship to the external world of perception. The notion of *Kunstwollen* provided Riegl with an explanatory model which allowed art to have historical agency. Through *Kunstwollen* different visual understandings of human beings' relationship to the world become articulated, and hence there is a mechanism to link art to its cultural context. How Riegl conceived this becomes clear in the following passage:

> Yet man is not just a being perceiving exclusively with his sense (passive), but also a longing (active) being. Consequently, man wants to interpret the world as it can most easily be done in accordance with his inner drive (which may change with nation, location and time). The character of this *Wollen* is always determined by what may be termed the conception of the world at a given time [*Weltanschauung*] (again in the widest sense of the term), not only in religion, philosophy, science, but also in government and law . . . .[3]

For Wölfflin too, psychology explained art's connection to society. Initially, Wölfflin used contemporary experimental psychology to account for changes in style from the Renaissance to the baroque in terms of change in popular mood. Then, after 1893, when Wölfflin encountered Adolf von Hildebrand's *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst*, an application of Herbartian psychology to art, he came to ascribe changes to fundamental shifts in perception and cognition (Podro, 1982, pp. 98–151). However, unlike Riegl's use of Herbart's psychology to account for art as a progressive development, Wölfflin's conception of

aesthetic history is essentially cyclical: clearly ordered visual forms are succeeded by more diffuse ones, which in turn are followed again by a newly clarified style.

This is apparent in Wölfflin's most famous book, *The Principles of Art History* (*Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*), which appeared in 1915. Here he proposes that the history of art should be regarded as a process of internal development. However, as Martin Warnke has shown, during the book's gestation, Wölfflin worked through a range of possible extra-artistic explanations for the transformations of style he described. According to Warnke, it was the book's own social context which eventually led Wölfflin to suppress any reference to them. *The Principles* appeared shortly after the outbreak of the First World War when Germany, where Wölfflin was then teaching, was in the grip of nationalist euphoria (Warnke, 1989, pp. 172–87). Since his accession to the throne in 1890, the Emperor, Wilhelm II, had interfered increasingly in artistic affairs and demanded that his subjects produce patriotic art which would rally them to the demands of the *Vaterland*. Wölfflin saw these developments with increasing alienation. So, like Clement Greenberg's Formalist art history (Crow, 1996, pp. 8–11), Wölfflin's Formalism was adopted as a response to a perceived ideological misuse of art in his own time.

Both Riegl and Wölfflin were acutely aware that the present situation of art historians shaped their accounts of the past (for Riegl, see Iversen, 1993, p. 7; for Wölfflin, see Hart, 1982, p. 296). Their recourse to interdisciplinarity – to a historicized psychology – was an attempt to escape the vicious hermeneutic circle whereby one only sees what one knows and only knows what one sees. Visual perception provided them with a mechanism which, like Hegel's *Geist*, was historically specific, yet provided sufficient continuity with the past to provide a framework for interpretation. Riegl's and Wölfflin's approach to art history addressed both of the issues for interdisciplinary art history identified at the beginning of this essay: it provided a means by which art works could be shown to be deeply embedded in the societies which produce them; yet, it also gave a methodological tool with which to reflect on the hermeneutic conditions of interpretation.

As I have tried to show, the Formalist art histories of the past were by no means naive in their attempts to establish art history as an autonomous discipline. What makes such accounts problematic today is not their Formalism as such, but the reductionism with respect to historical processes which is the result of their particular approach to interdisciplinarity. It is in this sense that interdisciplinarity is their Achilles' heel. This is also true for other systematic art histories advanced in the early twentieth century. One could continue the discussion by showing that an interdisciplinary conception underlay the distinctive approaches of most of the prominent German and Austrian art historians who were forced to emigrate in the 1930s. So, for example, Aby Warburg's attempt to connect art to other cultural productions and his interpretation of them as expressive of mental tensions is informed by psychoanalysis. Erwin Panofsky's writings, which link art and literature, are based on a neo-Kantian philosophical

conception of the 'objectification of the subjective', while Ernst Gombrich's developmental account of art as a 'history of making and matching' is informed by psychology and conceived in analogy to methods in the natural sciences.

However, it was one of Riegl's most perceptive critics, Walter Benjamin, who in 1936 recognized what for many today is the most obvious flaw in Riegl's history of art, and, by implication, all the other art historians I have mentioned so far. Riegl, he wrote, 'did not attempt – and, perhaps, saw no way – to show the social transformations expressed by these changes of perception'.[4] Benjamin's criticism was, of course, based on a version of the Marxist analysis of society. Marxism as an approach to art history was taken up by art historians like Frederick Antal and Arnold Hauser who formed part of the circle of Marxist theorists which included Georg Lukács in Budapest in the second decade of the twentieth century. As an approach to art history, however, Marxism only gained a high profile in the 1970s following publications in Germany by Martin Warnke, in France by Nicos Hadjinicolaou, and in Britain and America most famously by John Berger and T. J. Clark.

Marx's own statements on art are few, almost all confined to his early writings, and not unambiguous. It is not absolutely clear from them that art, for Marx, belongs to the ideological superstructure (and hence expresses the social transformations taking place in the economic base). On some accounts, art, for Marx, like science, enjoys a degree of autonomy that raises it above the more historically restricted cultural products that he identifies as 'ideologies'. As Otto Werckmeister has shown, this view that art is nonideological has been dominant in Marxist art histories, both in the West and the formerly communist East. Yet these accounts do not represent an improvement on the idealism which Marxists object to in Formalist or iconographic approaches, Werckmeister argues, for the implication is that art works contain (or lack) revolutionary potential for reasons that are independent of the social conditions of the societies whose product they are (Werckmeister, 1972, pp. 501–19). According to Werckmeister, it is only if art is understood as part of a society's ideology that a Marxist history of art can provide an understanding of art's relationship to society which goes beyond previous approaches. In this sense, Marx's theory of ideology offers a nonidealist, nonpsychological mechanism which provides what systematic art historians like Riegl and Wölfflin have looked for: a way of showing that art is connected to society while at the same time allowing an account of agency in history which bridges present conditions of interpretation with the past.

Yet, at least in the hands of Marxism's more orthodox practitioners, the price of this has been a severe form of reductionism. This charge has been levelled, for example, against Frederick Antal's comparative reading of Gentile da Fabriano's *Madonna with Child* and Masaccio's contemporary picture of the same subject, whose stylistic differences Antal interprets as direct reflections of two antagonistic classes in Florence at the time (Antal, 1947). While it is not problematic to show, as T. J. Clark has done, that a particular period and society – in his case nineteenth-century France – 'cannot be conducted without some general

theory – admitted or repressed – of the structure of a capitalist economy', a full-scale endorsement of Marx's theory of ideology would have to accept that all art is false consciousness (Clark, 1973, p. 11). Now most art historians influenced by Marx's analysis of society have not been prepared to go so far. Clark himself is explicit that 'art is at its greatest' when it goes *against* contemporary ideologies: 'A work of art may have ideology (in other words, those ideas, images, and values which are generally accepted, dominant) as its material, but it *works* that material; it gives it a new form and at certain moments that new form is in itself a subversion of ideology' (Clark, 1973, p. 13). By emphasizing that art works on and in history, Clark, like Riegl, Wölfflin, and others before them, adopts the idea that art is formative for societies not just reflective of them. Similarly, many Marxist art historians have been attracted to the Gramscian idea that art forms part of a complex struggle for 'hegemony' rather than simply mirroring the economic base of society. Yet, in thus attenuating art's ties with the ideological superstructure, the account loses the historical force which Marx's theory of ideology aspired to. Changes in the way art appears can no longer be accounted for simply by recourse to transformations in the economic base, but can have many socially more specific reasons.

Interdisciplinarity Today

This seems to be the predicament of contemporary art historical research. Historical changes, as well as interdisciplinary connections between art and other cultural creations, can only be accounted for on a microhistorical level. Any conceptualization of them in relation either to transformations in economic structures, to psychology or to transcendental ideals seems dubious. Often this has led to simplistic causal accounts of just the kind that Riegl and Wölfflin criticized. So, for example, studies on the relationship between science and art have burgeoned recently in the wake of calls for interdisciplinary study. Yet, more often than not, this has resulted in univocal accounts which privilege science: the scientific quest for truth is seen to determine changes in art (for instance, in leading to the invention of perspective or the development of Impressionist painting techniques).

In order to avoid such reductive accounts, Poststructuralists have aimed to avoid giving causal priority to any single realm of culture. Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, first published in France in 1966 as *Les mots et les choses*, is the most radical attempt to give an account in these terms of the different forms of knowledge which in the nineteenth century came to be known as science and the humanities (he does not, however, discuss art extensively). For Foucault, different regions of knowledge depend on and articulate certain general discursive formations which structure social life. Foucault sees strong shifts in these formations, but he refrains from any account of what might motivate them.[5] This

amounts, as has often been noted, to a loss of clear patterns for the explanation of change

It might be argued, however, that the identification of motivations for change is crucial to those who wish to reflect critically on contemporary values in the study of the past without undoing the latter's difference. The task is to see how a microhistorical study, in which changes can be accounted for, can be fruitfully brought together with a macrohistory, which attempts to meditate on the connection of the past with the present but to avoid the reductive systems of the past. Interdisciplinarity was, as we have seen, crucial to this enterprise and still is. In itself, however, it is not the solution; it merely points to the problem.

Notes

1 See for example a volume of the *Art Journal*, devoted to 'The Crisis in the Discipline', *Art Journal*, 42, Winter 1982, 279–325.
2 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. by E. S. Haldane, introduction by Frederick C. Beiser, vol. 1, University of Nebraska Press, 1995, p. 50 (translation modified).
3 Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, trans. by Rolf Winkes, George Bretschneider Editore, 1985, p. 231.
4 Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn, introduction by Hannah Arendt, Harcourt, Brace and Word, 1968, p. 224.
5 So, for example, Foucault diagnoses the dissolution of what he calls the *classical episteme* as taking place at the turn of the nineteenth century. The *classical episteme*, based on a system of representations, comes to be replaced by a conception of objects as structures: now knowledge of objects is a knowledge of their causality, their history and their origin, while previously it was located in the search for a common structure mediating things and their representation.

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Chapter 39

Against Curatorial Imperialism: Merleau-Ponty and the Historicity of Art

Paul Crowther

There is a notion of meaning which is central to art-historical discourse. It holds that the meaning of an artefact is primarily a function of the relation which holds between it and the specific historical circumstances of production. This *external-relation* notion of meaning is fine if we take it to mean no more than the work's historical significance as a work of art. In Postmodern times, however, it has increasingly been taken to represent the meaning of art as such. But there is actually a great deal more to such meaning than this. In the present chapter I shall offer a few reasons why.

My basic theoretical standpoint is one which understands any present moment or stage of awareness to be an interplay between specific historical circumstances and more constant features in the human condition. These constants are bound up with the necessary correlation of signifying activity and basic bodily competencies. The general philosophical framework which sustains this approach is a development of ideas from Kant and post-Kantian continental European philosophy – notably Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty is of particular importance in relation to the understanding of art. This is because he provides a rigorous phenomenology of the artwork's experiential origins and its physical expression in the *made* object. As he puts it 'It is the expressive operation begun in the least perception of the body which amplifies into painting and art' (Merleau-Ponty, 1974, p. 83). This passage-to-meaning is a process of completion rather than a mere translation of subjective states into a more enduring form. In this respect, the artist's handling of the medium is of decisive importance. This is because – in the act of painting, assembling, writing or whatever – the artist is able to gather up and focus his or her scattered perceptual viewpoints or interpretations of the world. The artist's work thus exemplifies 'the emblem of a certain relationship to being' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 54).

With this phrase Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the enduring significance of art as a productive force that articulates possible modes of perceiving and of acting in the world. As a made object, indeed, the artwork has its own distinctive historicity through its relation to tradition:

> This is the historicity which lives in the painter at work when with a single gesture he links the tradition that he recaptures and the tradition that he founds. It is the historicity which in one stroke welds him to all which has ever been painted in the world, without his having to leave his place, his time, or his blessed or accursed labor. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 63)

This medium- and practice-based historicity is very much at odds with the external-relation notion of meaning noted at the start of this chapter. It is therefore now worth considering why the external-relation model should enjoy such major contemporary popularity.

There are a number of factors involved. The first is the decline of Formalism. At the start of the twentieth century, Formalist critics such as Bell and Fry argued that the basis of distinctively artistic meaning was the possession of harmonious formal qualities (Bell, 1931; Fry, 1968). In the second half of the century, Formalist concerns were voiced in a more sophisticated way by Clement Greenberg.[1] In particular, Greenberg affirmed the importance of form in declaring that which was unique to painting as a medium – namely planar flatness.

The first significant attacks on Formalism originate, in effect, within art itself. Movements such as Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism prove extremely difficult to assimilate in purely formal terms. Tendencies in the 1950s and 1960s such as 'neo-Dada', Pop Art and, at the other extreme, Minimal art, are even more aggressively resistant to Formalist approaches. Of perhaps even greater significance in this respect are the effects of 1960s political utopianism. Figures such as Joseph Beuys actively sought – through work, action and propaganda – to collapse the divides between art and life, and, by removing the elitist and specialist base of artistic production, to thoroughly democratize it.

Another related factor implicated in this attack on Formalist values has been a recent reaffirmation of the significance of Duchamp (e.g. de Duve, 1996). In particular his emphasis on the primacy of the idea over the artist's making of an object has proven enormously important in stimulating the rise of Conceptual Art.

The negations of Formalism have been profoundly complemented by developments in the broader intellectual world. In the 1970s bodies of textual and cultural theory known collectively as Poststructuralism became widely influential beyond their French contexts of origin. The works of Barthes, Lacan, Derrida and Foucault were also given an extra dimension of significance through their appropriation by feminist cultural critics such Kristeva, Irigaray and – more specifically in the field of the visual arts – by writers such as Laura Mulvey, Griselda Pollock, Norman Bryson and Victor Burgin.[2]

Despite significant differences between them, these theorists have one decisive common denominator. It is the insight – derived from Ferdinand de Saussure – that meaning is a function of differences between signs in a broader field, a field which is composed by the signs themselves, rules for applying them, and changing historical and cultural contexts of application.[3] The implications of

such a position for the notion of meaning *per se* are at first sight quite radical. Such a position makes meaning appear much more shifting and unstable than is commonly supposed. The various categories and concepts in terms of which we comprehend the world are seen as interleaved and overlapping, rather than clearly defined and distinct from one another. Indeed, in so far as self-consciousness is itself inseparable from the use of linguistic signs, then it also appears that the self is much more labile and 'ex-centric' than common discourse represents it to be.

The conjunction of this fundamental poststructuralist tenet and the anti-Formalist developments in the art world noted earlier, amount to a massive attack upon what is commonly called 'essentialism'. In the context of art this not only includes Formalist approaches but, indeed, any attempt to define art as a unique form of meaning. The anti-essentialist position, in contrast, holds that art should be seen as a constantly transforming network of representational or, better, 'discursive' visual practices. To privilege, say, form, expression or artifice as definitive features which distinguish art from mere visual significance as such is to perform an act of 'closure', i.e. to elevate some transient feature which consolidates ruling class, racial or gender interests into a timeless 'essential' truth.

Now this anti-essentialism has not only become something of an orthodoxy amongst contemporary art historians and critics, it has also reinforced a specific kind of theoretical climate in the art world itself. This climate favours loose forms of conceptualism and performance art. Such tendencies, indeed, often take themselves to be questioning essentialist features of art practice by creating a 'space' for women's voices and marginalized minorities. Even traditional artistic idioms such as abstract and figurative painting find themselves recontextualized by antiessentialism. The immediacy of their sensible impact is downgraded in favour of the supposed broader social significance of this impact (vis-à-vis 'phallocentrism' etc., etc.). Questions of skill, techniques and quality hardly play a role – except to be stigmatized as consolidating the interests of white male middle-class heterosexist Eurocentric patriarchy.

The anti-essentialist emphasis shifts the productive energy of the art world into the curatorial sphere. By 'curatorial' here I do not simply mean the activities of curators (although they are of major significance). Rather the notion should also be taken to encompass all aspects of arts management, criticism and history. But here we have a problem. All art is amenable to interpretation by curators, critics and historians. Such curatorial mediations are, indeed, a vital element in any living artistic culture. However, it is important to emphasize that acts of curatorial intervention are neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition of art's basic meaning *as* art or representation. With most Conceptual and performance works, in contrast, matters are rather different. For without appropriate curatorial interpretation it is not even possible to recognize that they are laying claim to artistic status, let alone recognize what their more specific meaning is.[4]

Consider, for example, *God* – a work by Damien Hirst from 1997. It consists of a cabinet containing drug bottles and medicine packets. Apparently the work

is a comment on the nature of mortality. However, the setting-up of this specific reference and criteria for deciding what is being said about it cannot be achieved on the basis of the internal visual resources of the work itself. In a case such as this, the artist simply appropriates or juxtaposes readymade things. The nature of the particular 'artistic' statement is intelligible only through curatorial intervention, i.e. through reference to a network of intentions, theories and cultural conditions which are not physically inscribed in the work through a process of making. Such works, in fact, are not art, but rather what I shall call *curatorial pseudo-art*.

Works of this sort create not only a problem of communication but also one of reception and dissemination. In order to be noticed, the artist has to do something startling and to find some appropriate curatorial ratification for his or her gesture. This involves an address to the media rather than to other artists. One sign of this is the increasing celebrity status accorded to curators, gallery owners and collectors. In this respect, for example, it is significant that the Kassel Documenta of 1997 was discussed not so much in terms of the artists involved but rather as 'Catherine David's exhibition'. Again, Louisa Buck's recent eulogy on 'Brit Art' devotes two of its three sections to the curatorial and gallery world (Buck, 1997).

Of course, it might seem that such developments are to be welcomed in so far as they are supported by the 'truths' of anti-essentialism. I would argue, however, that what arises from such developments is only a pseudo-art which exemplifies curatorial production and values. I say pseudo-art rather than art proper, because the anti-essentialist position which offers apparent justification for the artistic status of such works is, in fact, a gross distortion of the truth about meaning (see Crowther, 1993a, pp. 25–39). Suffice it to say that the differential structure of significance described earlier is an abstraction from the level of direct embodied interaction with the world. The instability of meaning, overlap of categories, and 'ex-centricity' of the self are only how the world appears when one aspect of the logical structure of significance – differentiality – is taken to be a sufficient description of our actual perceptual and psychological engagement with the world. It is not. The differential perceptual and semantic relations of the cognitive field are stabilized by reference to the body (see Crowther, 1993a, 1993b).

Given these considerations, we are now in a position to ask whether a post-curatorial art is possible. This means, in effect, deciding whether art production can become artist- rather than curator-centred, once more. The answer is yes; but its substance is complex. There can be no simple global 'return' to traditional artistic media such as a painting and handmade sculpture. And there can be no return to Formalism as the basis of criticism – if only for the reason that Formalism is as distorting a doctrine as the anti-essentialism which replaced it. What is required is a rethinking of the nature of twentieth-century art so as to see an authentically historical route into the future.

To sketch out what is involved here, it is worth considering first a putative objection to my theory. The objection holds that all Modernist art which aban-

dons (or emphatically deviates from) pictorial representation must necessarily involve curatorial mediation in order to be intelligible. The artist must provide a manifesto or the critic or curator must explain what the work is about. This objection is, however, unfounded. The plethora of manifestos and texts explaining what nonfigurative works are about are not necessary in order for the works to be found intelligible. As I have argued elsewhere (using the philosophical position adopted in this chapter) there is a loose code over and above the possession of 'intuitively' recognized significant form, which all art – including nonfigurative works – exemplifies (Crowther, 1997, chapter 1, pp. 9–31). It centres on what I call the principle of reciprocity. This consists of mutually dependent relations such as those of figure/ground, presence/absence, actual/possible, real/ideal, and containment/excess. If a work follows the presentational formats of painting or sculpture, it means that we take the work to be 'about' something. In pictorial representation the most basic element which a work is about is its recognizable kind of subject matter. But such representation also exemplifies reciprocal relations of the sort just mentioned. In works which depart from the ordinary conventions of pictorial representation, indeed, such reciprocal relations are to the fore. Their artistic significance consists not in a work's articulation or reciprocal structures *per se*, but in the distinctive style with which a particular structure or structures is rendered by the individual work.

Consider, for example, the basic structural format adopted by Barnett Newman after 1948. It consists of a colour-field divided by verticals of varying width, density and texture. The optical effect of such formal devices is not – as, say, Greenberg would have it – simply an aesthetic declaration of that which is essential to painting as a medium, namely planar flatness. Rather it is an acute exploration of a relation which is the basis of all perception of figure and ground. Newman explores the ambiguities of this relation, most notably the interdependence of the two terms. We can, for example, sometimes read the verticals as superimposed on the field (i.e. as figure), and, at other times, as gap through which light from behind the field (i.e. the ground) shows itself.

It is important to emphasize that reciprocal relations of this sort are not timeless essences. They are inherent in the structure of perception and self-consciousness, but the mode and significance of their articulation are historically specific. They are, in effect, functional principles. Newman, for example, uses figure and ground in such a distinctive stylistic way that they also suggest a relation between presence and absence, and this (in conjunction with the frequently overwhelming scale of his works) relates to a common cultural stock of associations with mortality. Malevich, in contrast, often uses the relation between figure and ground to give the illusion of forms in motion through space. In these and other cases, the artists use some identifiable reciprocal relation or relations to generate quite specific meanings. Such meanings (*qua* reciprocal) will be recognizable within the internal resources of the work itself but can also act as bearers for other more specific historical and theoretical notions which are only

recognizable by reference to external sources such as texts or original contexts of generation and reception.

It is of course the first level of meaning here which is decisive. This is because reciprocal relations form the basis of a semantic code. If a code is to be generally intelligible and not just some one-off act of meaning wherein item *a* is stipulated as referring to item *b*, then it must be *iterable*.[5] To be iterable a sign must be recognizable independently of both the immediate physical presence of the thing or things which it refers to, and of knowledge concerning the intentions or contexts underlying specific occasions of its use. In the case of visual signs this means that we must be able to recognize what kind of state of affairs or reciprocal relations is being represented from within the internal resources of the sign itself. Once we have understood the basic structure of reciprocity we can recognize different formulations of it without having to refer back to the original context in which the formulation was produced and received.

Now whilst reciprocal relations are necessarily involved in any artistic representation they are not a sufficient condition of its artistic status. The concept of art is a Western invention based on the capacity of some representations to be valued in their own right over and above their functional efficacy. To be valued in their own right here is often taken to mean aesthetic value. This is true, but there is rather more to it than that. The significance of art as a continuing practice is not simply the production of aesthetic form, but equally the production of new forms. This, of course, is why Kant describes originality as the basic feature of Fine Art (Kant, 1973, chapter 46, pp. 168–9).

I would argue that curatorially directed works do not exist adequately within such an horizon. It might at first seem otherwise – insofar as such works aim to do something new, surprising or showing. However (as Kant again wisely notes), there is the possibility of 'original nonsense' (ibid., p. 168). Much curatorially directed work is of this order. It lacks an *exemplary* character, i.e. fails to create or modify rules at a distinctively visual level of communication. Such work is locked rigidly into the time and place of its origination. It is transmissible as an event available to historical understanding, but not to that horizon of historical difference which is a necessary condition of art practice.

To see why this is so, I shall now develop Merleau-Ponty's clues concerning the distinctive historicity of visual art.

First, as an iterable practice, all visual representation refers to or exemplifies aspects of the world which are external to it. In pictorial representation such reference is achieved through the codification of a natural phenomenon – namely visual resemblance between one thing and another. In this context, foreshortening and perspective act as a basic syntax wherein such resemblances can be connected within the individual pictorial work.

Now in the tradition of Western visual representation this syntactic structure has undergone a number of paradigm shifts.[6] In classical Greek and Roman antiquity, the grouping of forms involves a kind of aggregate perspective with foreshortening and strong recession towards the horizon but without the forms

diminishing in exact proportion to one another. In medieval representation, a different syntactic paradigm is to the fore. Here we are dealing with much flatter-looking configurations where conformity to the planar structure of the representation is emphasized.

In the Renaissance, a further paradigm shift occurs, this time towards the realization of a mathematically exact perspective wherein objects diminish in relation to a vanishing point in exact proportion with one another. The significance of this and the other paradigm shifts is that they each open out new possibilities for artists. They offer frameworks of iterable syntactic rules wherein representation can now serve new iconographical purposes and, thereby, transform the institutional contexts within which artists operate. Artists who directly contribute to such transformations can be described as instigators of *paradigmatic historical difference*.

Of course, not all historical change is of such far-reaching significance. We need, therefore, to introduce a couple of subdivisions. In this respect, one might consider the aftermath of the achievement of mathematical perspective. Figures such as Raphael, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Rubens and Poussin, for example, each offer different explorations of light, colour and pictorial structure. They operate within the paradigm of mathematical perspective, but open out new ways in which the paradigm can be exemplified. In some cases – such as those of Raphael and Poussin – we can see their works as extraordinary refinements of those of their predecessors, whilst in others – such as Michelangelo and Rubens – we see works which are strikingly innovative. In either case, we might see such artists as instigators of (what I shall call) *effective historical difference*. This consists of the opening up of stylistic possibilities, i.e. new rules for manipulating the medium which are learnable only by looking at the works of other artists (rather than, say, by reading about them). Once learned, such rules can then be applied in many different geographical and iconographical contexts.

Again, not all historical change is of this order. There are many artists who figure in Renaissance and post-Renaissance art whose contribution is little more than the achievement of an individual style. We might see such works as instances of which I shall call *normal historical difference*. The term 'normal' is warranted here, in that artists of this kind (such as Taddeo Gaddi, Signac and Lancret) work within the parameters defined by both the paradigm, and the stylistic vectors of effective historical difference just described. They are members of schools and movements in art rather than the instigators of such schools and movements.

Finally one must mention the exemplars of what I shall call *neutral historical difference*. They constitute the vast majority of artists. All artists produce work which is nominally different from that of other artists but often this difference will have little effect. At best there may be a few stylistic traits or idiosyncrasies which allow the art historian to identify the artist's work.

It should be emphasized that this outline of historical change is only an outline. This being said, however, we have enough before us to comprehend how

the model might apply in relation to twentieth-century art. Picasso and Braque's Cubism is the key movement here in bringing about paradigmatic historical difference. In Cubism, we find a transformation of both representational semantic and syntactic structure. All pictorial representation involves reciprocal relations of the sort noted earlier, but in Cubism (and after) these become the basis of representation rather than something indirectly contained in the representational structure. All the major twentieth-century tendencies and movements exemplify reciprocal relations in different ways.[7] The leading and lesser figures in such tendencies and movements embody (respectively) the achievement of effective and normal and neutral historical difference.

Now it might seem, at first sight, that the theory I am proposing here actually favours the notion of curatorial art. For could it not be argued that Duchamp's unassisted readymades instigate a paradigmatic historical difference whose full implications have only been developed after the 1960s? The answer is no. The real implication of Duchamp's unassisted readymades is as anti-art – an ironic critical gesture against the prestige given to art. One might repeat this gesture in different ways at different times, but the point which it is making has already been made. Endless repetition adds little or nothing to it. The same is true if we take Duchamp as 'showing' how the boundaries of art can be extended. The problem here is that if we allow the unassisted readymades to count as art, then it follows, in principle, that anything can be art. There can be no longer any real artistic experimentation because the result of the experiment is known in advance. 'Yes, it's art; anything can be art.' If the 'artist' is wanting to say more than this, then we have to search out a curatorial intervention to explain what is going on.

We reach, therefore, the decisive point. Curatorial works are at best pseudo-art because they do not allow continuing change at the levels of paradigmatic and effective historical difference. They cannot exist as a genuine ongoing tradition of creativity, but only as occasionally witty or (more often) witless repetitions of Duchamp's original anti-art gesture. Lyotard has claimed that what is significant about real artistic creativity in the Modern and Postmodern eras is (amongst other things) the invention of *new* rules (Lyotard, 1984, p. 80). The point is, however, that curatorial pseudo-art cannot invent rules. It can only follow Duchamp's gesture, or depend upon the external-relation model of meaning. In this latter case, what the artist intends can only be discovered by reference to the original content of production. This context, however, cannot be generalized as a new rule which other artists can follow. It is a one-off event of ad hoc meaning conferral. Events of this kind are not iterable, and, lacking this property, cannot give rise to effective historical difference. Curatorial pseudo-art, in other words, is a practice doomed to operate within massively restricted parameters. There can be no new paradigms, only endless repetition and self-indulgence.

Finally, then, what of art proper? Well, despite the popularity of curatorial pseudo-art, a great deal of effective painting and sculpture continues to be carried out. Indeed, the paradigm of reciprocal relations also encompasses a great

deal of recent installation and assemblage art. Cornelia Parker and David Mach, for example, use readymade material but in a way which reconfigures it in reciprocally significant structures. And, again, even in such a curatorially friendly artist as Damien Hirst we find some works which go beyond mere curatorial production. His celebrated shark (which is actually entitled *The Physical Impossibility of the Idea of Death in the Mind of One Living*) for example is manifestly about that which is ultimately threatening, and the containment of this excess of fear. It is a remarkable exemplar of a familiar reciprocal relation, and can be recognized as such without resorting to curatorial opinion.

We are thus led to a conclusion. The paradigm of reciprocal relations is a continuing creative force in a way that curatorial pseudo-art is not. That this has not been recognized is due to the unwarranted assumption that the only alternative to the external-relation model of meaning is Formalism. I have tried to show that it is not. If therefore, the paradigm of reciprocal relations can be more fully recognized as the real basis of twentieth-century art, then the possibility of a postcuratorial art will be all the more secure. Such a recognition, indeed, might almost amount to a paradigm shift in its own right.

Notes

1 See, for example, the essay 'Modernist painting' included in Battcock (1966), pp. 100–10.
2 See, for example, Krauss (1986) and Bryson (1983).
3 The most effective Poststructuralist expression of this is in Derrida's notion of *différance*. See Derrida (1982), pp. 3–27.
4 Arthur Danto has attempted to make this necessary link with theoretical interpretation into the very basis of the definition of art itself. For an extended defence see Danto (1981). For a critique see Crowther (1993b), pp. 192–5.
5 For more about this see Crowther (1997), chapter 1, pp. 9–11.
6 I use the notion of a 'paradigm shift' in a way loosely analogous to Thomas Kuhn's use of the notion in relation to scientific change. See, for example, Kuhn (1974), pp. 43–51.
7 This claim is substantiated at length throughout Crowther (1997).

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Chapter 40

The Institutional Theory of Art: Theory and Antitheory

Garry L. Hagberg

The first thing to be said about one of the most influential conceptions of art in recent decades is that it is very much what it sounds like: it is a theory of art, centrally concerned with the *definition* of art, that focuses on the institutional contexts in which the arts are created, exhibited, interpreted, taught, acquired, and so forth. Taken at first glance, it is difficult to deny that there must be at least an element of truth in this theory. Many people, for good reason, have a strong intuitive sense that the decision as to whether a given object, performance, installation, etc. is a work of art has become an arbitrary exercise of power and authority by persons strategically placed within the various institutions of the arts. This is particularly so in an artistic age that has been through numerous experimental phases in which the reigning consensual definition of art of the day has been challenged repeatedly (Weintraub, 1996), often just as soon as the consensus becomes clear. However, despite this initial intuitive plausibility, many have argued against the theory on a number of very different grounds, some of which I will consider here. But one needs, first, a sense of the philosophical environment – indeed the reigning consensus in the philosophy of art that the institutional theory challenged – from which the institutional theory emerged, and, second, an articulation of the actual content of the theory.

Writing at a time when the views of Ludwig Wittgenstein were broadly influential throughout the various subdivisions of philosophy, Morris Weitz published a seminal paper entitled "The role of theory in aesthetics" (Weitz, 1956, pp. 27–35; also developed in Weitz, 1989, pp. 152–9), in which he argued that the concept "art" displays a "logic" that is by its very nature resistant to closed definition. Such a closed definition would occur when a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for "arthood" are analyzed out of the existent works and practices in such a way that a definitional essence (the properties or qualities specified as necessary and sufficient) becomes (or is revealed as) the decisive matter with regard to art categorization. Weitz followed Wittgenstein's example of the open concept of a game, in which, Wittgenstein argued, we find a class of cases, e.g., chess, soccer, hockey, cricket, poker, baccarat, hopscotch, football,

marbles, solitaire, the Olympics, etc., categorically grouped and yet exhibiting no feature in common to all. That is, games are not classified as games in virtue of the presence of an essence or necessary and sufficient condition, but rather are grouped by "family-resemblance" features, i.e. overlapping characteristics that give some games features in common – cards appear in some, balls in others, dice in some, pucks in others, etc. – but that do not constitute necessary or sufficient conditions for "gamehood" – one can have a game without a ball as well as a ball without a game. Wittgenstein's family-resemblance metaphor thus gave philosophers a way of explaining categorization or concept-membership in a way consistent with our practices and yet free of what at that time seemed – and still does to many – a too-tidy logical falsification of the facts of our practices.

Weitz naturally extended this thinking into the arts, particularly into the question of the definition of art, concluding that art logically behaves as an open, not a closed concept, and that artworks have been and continue to be classified through overlapping family-resemblance features, none of which is definitionally essential. By this account some works may have properties A and B (e.g. are painted on cave walls, depict running bison), others B and C (e.g. depict bison and use oil on canvas), others C and D (use oil on canvas and are abstract), others D and E (e.g. are abstract and use carved marble), and so forth, to works exhibiting Y and Z (e.g., is a found object and given the title "In Advance of the Broken Arm"). Does Duchamp's snow shovel found-art object have any exhibited property in common with the cave paintings at Lascaux? Evidently not, nor will it display a property in common with eighteenth-century English portraiture, Beethoven's late string quartets, or the films of Satyajit Ray. Nor do these latter cases exhibit properties held in common by all that are definitionally prerequisite to membership in the class "Art." Yet, as Weitz and the open-concept or family-resemblance philosophers of art[1] clearly recognized, they are all works of art nonetheless, and any respectably honest theory of art would simply have to accommodate multiplicity and diversity. This, in brief, was the context of antidefinitional consensus into which the institutional theory intervened; the consensus was generally called antiessentialism, for obvious reasons, and the institutional theorists believed that a fundamental distinction, one ironically central to the revival of essentialism in the theory of art, had not been taken into account.

Maurice Mandelbaum (1965) challenged the pro-Wittgensteinian consensus concerning definition. He argued that Wittgenstein's account of the categorization of games fails to distinguish between exhibited and nonexhibited properties, or between readily visible or apprehensible properties intrinsic to the object being perceived on the one hand and relational properties, i.e. properties or attributes not visually or readily perceivable but only cognitively apprehensible, on the other. These latter, nonexhibited or relational properties are common enough in life, e.g. whether someone is a grandmother or not is not readily perceivable by just looking, yet it does not follow from the insufficiency of visual scrutiny for the determination of grandmotherhood that the relational status of

grandmother is unimportant, secondary, or in any other way of lesser certainty than any fact about her that is readily perceptible. Indeed it may be more important, and it is the relational fact that, obviously, determines her membership in the class "Grandmothers." Mandelbaum argued that classification proceeds analogously, thus allowing for the possibility of an essence to art that is, although nonexhibited, nevertheless definitionally prerequisite to the correct classification of an object in the class "Art."

Mindful of this essence-revivifying distinction, George Dickie (1974), in one of the two most influential writings in the institutional theory of art, positions himself clearly against Weitz and the larger Wittgensteinian consensus. First, Dickie distinguishes between what he sees as three distinct senses of the term "work of art": the primary sense that is classificatory; a secondary derivative sense; and a third, evaluative sense. It is the first that concerns definition; the second and the third are largely employed to account for counterexamples. If one says of a painted yellow square that may or may not be a work of art (e.g. it could be a color sample) "This is a work of art," that is the classificatory sense. If one says of a piece of driftwood or a seashell that resembles a person's face "This is a work of art," that is the derivative sense, which is a distinct sense that does not generally function in the classificatory way but still calls our attention to aesthetic qualities the object may have in common with classificatory-sense objects, e.g. driftwood may strongly resemble Brancusi's *Bird in Space* or the shell may resemble cycladic sculpture. And if one says of a birthday cake "That is a work of art!," that is the evaluative sense (again independent of the primary sense). These senses can converge, as Dickie notes, in the exclamation, "That Rembrandt is a work of art!"; as the classificatory sense is already implicit in "Rembrandt," the "work of art!" phrase functions in a laudatory evaluative sense.

One reason this tripartite categorization of senses is important to the institutional theory is the theory's revival of necessary-and-sufficient-condition analysis. Dickie argues that artifactuality is a necessary condition for arthood in the primary classificatory sense. Artifactuality is, of course, a fairly straightforward exhibited property. But since necessary conditions are not sufficient conditions, i.e. although (if Dickie is right) one cannot have an artwork without artifactuality, artifacts that are not art are commonplace. So what more is needed to meet the definitional demands of the theory? Dickie brings in the nonexhibited or relational property of institutional status, a property, as Dickie (1993) says, "as complicated as artifactuality is simple." Dickie is here developing a direction pointed to in the other (and earlier) of the two most influential writings in institutional theory, "The art world" by Arthur Danto (1964) (to which I will return). There, what Danto calls "the atmosphere of theory," and the historical relatedness or relational properties of the work of art, are identified as essential conditions for arthood.

Dickie, following Danto, is arguing that art possesses an abiding nature, indeed an essence, that is (a) in part readily observable – artifactuality; and (b) in part

only conceivable – the institutional embeddedness of the object. Each system within the art world – theater, painting, sculpture, literature, music, and so forth – "furnishes an institutional background for the conferring of the status on objects within its domain" (Dickie, 1993, p. 211). And these systems are extraordinarily elastic, thus allowing, on the surface, the appearance of the greatest diversity and multiplicity while in concealed – or at least non-exhibited – truth, the greatest definitional uniformity is and has been maintained. Duchamp, for example, thus did not genuinely or deeply challenge art's essence; he rather made salient an aspect of art's abiding nature that had been doing definitional duty all along, i.e. the institutional conferral of status upon the candidate-object.

Dickie thus arrives at a position in which a succinct formulation of the institutional theory of art is available: "A work of art in the classificatory sense is (a) an artifact; (b) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the art world)" (Dickie, 1993, p. 212). Dickie himself examines each of the elements of the institutional definition, i.e. (a) artifactuality; (b) action on behalf of an institution; (c) the conferral of status; (d) being a candidate; and (e) aesthetic appreciation; each had been subjected to rigorous analysis and critical scrutiny by a large number of aestheticians. However, before turning to selected criticisms of the institutional definition within those five categories and beyond, we need a somewhat fuller account of the content of Danto's position vis-à-vis institutionalism.

In his now-classic "The art world," Arthur Danto develops a number of ideas fundamental to the course aesthetic theory has taken in the decades since the essay's appearance in 1964, and it was instrumental in the return to aesthetic theory after the antitheoretical Wittgensteinian period. Giving a sense of his philosophical priorities and objectives, Danto quickly shows that a theory of art founded on *mimesis*, or imitation, cannot suffice. The phrase "is an imitation" is not a sufficient condition for "is art" (Danto, 1964, in Dickie et al., 1989, p. 171), so the Imitation Theory of Art, as he dubs it, must, he argues, be supplanted. But the kind of theory that will supplant it will still be a *unifying* one, one that subsumes great diversity in unity. He congratulates the Imitation Theory, despite its ultimate shortcomings, for being "exceedingly powerful," "explaining a great many phenomena connected with the causation and evaluation of artworks, bringing a surprising unity into a complex domain" (Danto, 1964, in Dickie et al., 1989, p. 172). That is, for Danto, the purpose of art theory.[2]

Danto puts forward, as Marcia Eaton has rightly termed it, a metaphysical institutional theory of art (Eaton, 1988, p. 92); it is important to note that Danto vociferously resists any suggestion that he defends, or even implicitly endorses, the institutional theory as adumbrated by Dickie, and as we shall see his metaphysical institutionalism is strikingly different in a number of respects. It is within Danto's complexly unfolding theory that a distinct ontology of the work of art (i.e. the distinct *kind* of object, and the metaphysical category to which the art-object belongs) is articulated. Noting that the Imitative Theory – that the

defining essence of the work of art is given by its mimetic function – was supplanted (although as Danto rightly observes the actual history was considerably more complicated than this suggests) in the nineteenth century by what he dubs the Reality Theory – which holds that artists came to be seen not as unsuccessfully copying real things (the beginning of the reason for which Plato would banish them) but rather as creating new things real in themselves. Aiming (as Danto quotes Roger Fry) "not at illusion but at reality," the Reality Theory provided a new way of looking at painting. Danto gives examples of the deliberate "dislocation of form from contour in Roualt and Dufy, the arbitrary use of color planes in Gauguin and the Fauves" (Danto, 1964, in Dickie et al., 1989, p. 173), and others, all demonstrating that their works were *non*-imitations, *non*-illusions.

But – and here is a vitally important metaphysical step to Danto's theory – the creation of a broadly illusory, broadly mimetic (e.g. still representational) object that declares itself *not* an illusory or mimetic object does not then constitute the creation of the real represented thing, i.e. making a representational work of art in this distinct sense still does not of course mean that one is thereby making the real thing it represents. It rather creates a new ontological space that is now opened *between* the real object and the facsimile-representation of it. An object occupying that space will be an artwork that "is a non-facsimile . . . and a new contribution to the world" (Danto, 1964, in Dickie et al., 1989, p. 173). Such an object, like Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters*, will be a nonfacsimile of real potato eaters, and as nonfacsimile, as "non-imitation, had as much right to be called a real object as did its putative subject" (Danto, 1964, in Dickie et al., 1989, p. 173).

From here it is but a short step to Danto's next foundational point. More recent artists have continued to work in this distinctly artistic ontological space, with, as Danto with characteristic critical insight explains, Lichtenstein painting large-scale comic strip panels, Jasper Johns producing logically inimitable objects like paintings of numbers – a painting of a number is not an imitation of another thing, a number, but rather *is* a (painted) number – and Rauschenburg and Oldenburg both creating (surely in reference to Plato's famous discussion of the lowly ontology of art in *Republic*, Book XII) beds. In filling this artistically created logical space with such ontologically distinct objects, art has now arrived at a point at which it asks, within its own material (and Danto sees Warhol's Brillo boxes as the embodied articulation of the question), what is the *difference* between an art-object and a real object from which it is visually (or perhaps one should say, keeping cognition as far out of the picture as can be, retinally) indistinguishable? The simple answer, part and parcel of the Imitation Theory, i.e. that one is an imitation of the other, is now, following the object's declaration of ontological independence, clearly not available. Nor is the obviously unacceptable answer that an uncomprehending materialist might give available, i.e. that if they look the same, they are the same: if one puts Johns's numbers on one's house to show its address, and if one furnishes one's rooms in that house with Rauschenburg's and Oldenburg's beds, one is making not just rather bad curatorial

decisions, one is making *ontological* mistakes. The answer, Danto argues, and the aspect or element of the case that the uncomprehending would miss, is the *atmosphere of theory* surrounding the one object and absent from the other.

There is, as Danto develops the point, a logically distinct "is" of artistic identification that corresponds to this distinct ontological space. It is not any familiar philosophically categorized "is" of identity, predication, existence, identification, or any other invented logico-philosophical sense of "is," but rather the one known to children who say of a broom "this is a horse!" and then "ride" it around the room crying out cowboy directives. And a child (if there is one) who sees only a broom does not comprehend his playmate's "is" and thus does not in any fuller sense see what is before them. Similarly, the uncomprehending materialist might look at a red square painting, a political work of art entitled *Red Square*, as *just* a red square (e.g., a color sample) and thus will neither understand the "is" in "this is a work of art" nor see in any fuller sense what is placed before him. Yet he does, of course, see the red square. He just does not – indeed without the atmosphere of theory prerequisite to aesthetic perception he *cannot* – see "*Red Square*." Danto is ingenious at inventing and argumentatively employing such examples, and he sums the matter up with characteristic acuity: "To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an art world" (Danto, 1964, in Dickie et al., 1989, p. 177). Danto thus says, with the utmost importance for the development of the institutional theory of art by Dickie and others, that until the uncomprehending materialist masters the "is" of artistic identification he will not be able to *constitute* (Danto, 1964, in Dickie et al., 1989, p. 177) it as a work of art. Such mastery will involve the ability to conceptually place the art-candidate (Danto does not use that word) object into an atmosphere of art theory and history, to place it into a conceptual lineage of reception, to imaginatively compare it to historically and conceptually related pieces as part of the process of aesthetic evaluation, and so forth.

Taking a somewhat larger view of the situation, our theoretical attention moves away from intrinsic properties of the object as the defining essence of its "arthood," and refocuses on the external, relational properties or attributes from which, indeed, the institutional theory has taken both its inspiration and its name. Danto chooses analogies well also: he suggests that seeing a work of art without its atmosphere of theory (thus as a mere object) is like seeing print before one knows how to read (Danto, 1981, p. 124), and that seeing a work of art is in some respects like seeing a person, i.e. we do not see only a *body*. Those analogies cast in higher relief not only Danto's larger aesthetic theory, but also what one might call the "subtractive" nature of the fundamental ontological question motivating the entire theory. Again, what is left over when we subtract the mere physical object (e.g. the red square) from the work of art? What is left over when we subtract the mere seeing of marks of paper from reading? What is left over when we subtract the mere body from the concept of a person? These subtractive questions, of course, also propel us back towards necessary-and-sufficient-condition

analysis, back towards essentialism, back towards the unifying question of art's definition.

Yet it is important to mention again that Danto himself has strongly criticized (indeed, he has, as he put it, had to do Oedipal battle with (Danto, 1981, see esp. pp. 90–5; Danto, 1986)) Dickie's formulation of the institutional theory. Danto argues that it leads us, in focusing exclusively on what it sees as the classificatory definitional essence of art, to exclude consideration of the larger cultural aesthetic issues, particularly those of the neo-Hegelian conception of art's teleological historical development up to the point at which art becomes philosophy (for Danto, Warhol's Brillo boxes) and the subsequent posthistorical present in which everything, artistically speaking, is possible,[3] for which Danto wants to preserve space. Dickie's institutional view is one of definitional classification and is often metaphysically deflationary; Danto's view is both culturally and metaphysically expansive, and as such is very different both in style and substance from Dickie's. Yet, again from a larger perspective, both have, if in increasingly diverging ways, set the agenda for subsequent analyses of the institutional conception of the arts.

Although many have been quick to sense that there is some element of truth in the institutional theory of art, it has met with strong opposition from the time of its introduction. The theory has been accused of committing a fundamental error of causal direction in the determination of arthood: to be precise, one naturally assumes, indeed our pretheoretical intuitions dictate, that an object is placed within an art-institutional context *because* the nature of the object justifies and determines that institutional placement, and not (reversing the causation) that the object – whatever it may be or whatever properties, qualities, or attributes it may possess – is ontologically indeterminate prior to its institutional placement and converted into an art-object only when it is so institutionally situated. Again, many hold deep intuitions that tend in the aesthetic case (and perhaps others) to be antinominalistic (nominalism holding that a thing is seen to be what it is, or, more strongly, is *made* what it is, only by virtue of what we call or name it); such antinominalists expect the categorization of an object into a class or type to be justified through reference to the object's attributes and thus not an arbitrary matter. That is enough to license some to dismiss the institutional theory at its start, arguing, as a *reductio ad absurdum*, that any aesthetic theory that produces such a result disqualifies itself.

However, strong antinominalists aside, that does not close the issue – far from it. Particularly in a post-Duchampian artistic environment, many are now predisposed to favor precisely aesthetic nominalism, arguing that, if indeed "saying so now makes it so," let us thus proceed to an analysis of the "saying," i.e. the institutional contexts, the psychological categorizations of the viewer, or preferably both, that collectively constitute the identity of the object as a work of art. Hence the latter-day nominalists, arguing that anything can now be a work of art if we (or someone or a group of suitably empowered spokespersons) categorize it as such, see all artworks as having something in common – but not an

intrinsic feature or exhibited property. They all have, as Dickie suggests, conferred status, or as Danto suggests, an atmosphere of theory, that is, an essential property held only *after* the fact of categorization, of institutional placement. To characterize the debate in terms of nominalism helps, I believe, to make more evident the radical nature of the claim contained within the institutional conception concerning the arbitrariness, i.e. the indeterminateness prior to its classification, of the work of art. (It is in that philosophical context that Danto in particular has developed the concept of the "transfiguration" of a "mere real thing" into a work of art and the underlying "subtractive" metaphysical problem-structure of indiscernible or indistinguishable counterparts.)

The antinominalist might further raise an obvious point that is perhaps more difficult for an institutionalist than its apparent triviality may make it seem. We all know, extreme categorical conservatives and extreme relativists alike, that not everything placed into an institutional setting is, or becomes, an artwork. One can take an umbrella into a gallery, place it in an umbrella stand, and turn to the adjacent display of Duchamp's readymades and subsequent found-art without then confusing the umbrella stand with the objects in the exhibition (unless one makes a mistake that is the reverse of that made by the uncomprehending materialist above, i.e. unless we take too much, rather than too little, within our perceptual field as art). It will be said that this case is not genuine institutional placement, because, first, one's umbrella is not institutionalized in the *correct* way, and, second, it is obviously not *meant* to be part of the exhibition. But if "correct" means "intended-as-art" as determinable by the details of the positioning in the gallery, then the institutional theory is moving at a rapid speed and at the earliest point away from the real institutional setting and toward an intentional theory of art's constitution. Moreover, if on closer scrutiny it emerges that the intention to create an art object is more powerfully significant than "raw" institutional placement, then the object is *not* ontologically indeterminate from the outset in the way the institutional explanation of the categorization of the object as "art" would require. As we have seen, any full articulation of any variant of the institutional theory will, it is true, include intentional considerations, but the definitional issues cannot *reduce* to these considerations without thereby losing much of the institutional character of the theory. And for the record, it will be clear at a glance that an intentional definition of the essence of art is anything but straightforwardly acceptable in the light of our actual practices. Artifacts not intended as works of art have "migrated" from, for example, ethnographic collections into art museums. Conversely, it is not difficult to imagine cases where a person intends for an object to be a work of art without its thereby assuming that status. Both of those cases shift our concerns back toward institutional considerations.

In addition to the claim that the bare institutional setting is not sufficient to determine arthood (and thus that the theory actually relies on extrainstitutional considerations to gain its plausibility), anti-institutionalists have argued in favor of the possibility of the solitary, Robinson-Crusoe-like artist who produces art in complete isolation from any of the various ontologically empowered institu-

tions of the art world. That argument, however, seems either extremely simple or extraordinarily complex. On the one hand, it would be a simple matter for an institutionalist (and for Danto in particular) to reply that the Crusoe-like artist himself has an awareness of the art world, even though he is now isolated, and that he himself is bringing an awareness of the relevant conventions, institutions, and practices with him to his solitary easel and canvas, thus providing the essential criterion, an atmosphere of theory beyond that which meets the eye. On the other hand, the complex question, to my mind insufficiently examined to date, is whether, on analogy to Wittgenstein's famously difficult problem of a private language, an artist – the very *idea* of an artist – is conceivable in utter isolation from the communal practices, the lore, the customs, the knowledge, the history, and so forth of the art world. Wittgenstein concluded that the idea of a private language – by which is meant a language that is not merely *contingently* private, i.e., that no one else happens to speak but that is modeled upon (like a code, for example) ordinary speech, but rather a language that is *necessarily* private, i.e. one that owing to the metaphysical privacy of the inner sensations and experiences that serve as the referents in this (allegedly imaginable) language no one else thus could understand – is not merely false or empirically impossible, it is *unintelligible*. The very phrase "private language" is, on his view, disguised incoherence. To put a profoundly difficult matter misleadingly briefly, this is due to the unavoidable "stage-setting" of the concept of a language, or to the unwitting "smuggling in" of the ineliminatively *social* concepts contained within our idea of language that are necessary to the coherence and comprehensibility of the word "language," a word already nestled into a context of social, historical, pragmatic, cultural *use*.

The deeper question, the more difficult aesthetic question, would thus concern not a Crusoe-painter who happens to be stranded with oil and easel, but rather a Romulus-figure, raised by wolves and never brought into any society at any time, who lives in utter solitude, does not enter into any of our institutions (including speech), and . . . here it becomes instructively difficult to continue. We cannot say "and decides to take up painting," because of course "deciding," "taking up," and most importantly for present concerns, "painting," are all concepts prestationed into our culture and language. We cannot say "and just creates art *ex nihilo*" either, for similar reasons – particularly so with the concept "Art," since it is the central concept we are trying to explain. But it is likely that the best such considerations could do, if fully investigated, for the institutional theory would be to show that art is a complex set of social practices that, on direct analogy to language, can only arrive within what Wittgenstein called a "form of life," a cultural, communal context with entrenched modes of expression. Or such considerations might lead to the more focused point (which I believe to be true) that it is conceivable for art to arise only within a culture that already has language.

But neither of those conclusions, if reached, would confirm the institutional theory of art. While the first may yield the truth that a "private-art" (on the

model of a "private-language") is inconceivable, and the second may yield the truth that language is a necessary precondition for art, neither by itself nor both in concert yield the conclusion that the institutional theory of art as articulated by its proponents is thus necessarily true. They only yield a very different claim (and very likely the kernel of truth within the larger theory that gives it its initial intuitive plausibility) that art's abiding nature, like language, necessarily includes a public, social, cultural dimension. Of course many ethical practices have that as a necessary precondition as well, e.g. honesty, responsibility, charity, etc., but those are not thereby works of art. As we saw, a necessary condition for art is not a sufficient condition.

The institutional theory has also been criticized, particularly as it is encapsulated in Dickie's definition of art above, for either a vicious circularity on the one hand or an explanatory vacuity on the other (and those are tightly intertwined). Both issues have been the subject of extensive debates. Regarding the circularity, if we say that an artist puts forward a set of aspects of an artifact that are to be taken as a candidate for appreciation, we then would quite naturally want to know – in any single instance of such "putting-forward" (or status-conferral) – *why* the artist had put forth *these* aspects of *this* artifact. If we are then told that such questions shift categories into, not the classificatory sense of "work of art," but rather the evaluative sense, and that sense is not our essentialist definitional concern here, the sense that becomes difficult to avoid is in truth one of extreme frustration. The circularity thus spirals around a narrow, tightening course: (a) "What is art?"; (b) "A candidate for appreciation put forth by a suitably empowered spokesperson acting on behalf of the art world"; (c) "Who is a suitably empowered spokesperson," etc.? (d) "An artist"; and so forth, with the circle tightening following the next question; and (e) "Who is an artist?" Thus the *explanans* and the *explanandum* are not kept distinct – indeed they appear to rely mutually on each other for their content, and that is the classical sign of a circular definition.

The claim of explanatory vacuity is evident: we want to know *why* a given object (or its aspects) has been put forward, and we are told only the far less informative fact *that* it has been put forward. Here one might argue that the analytical distinction made at the outset between the allegedly distinct senses,[4] primarily between the classificatory and the evaluative, in fact eviscerates any theory to follow, by artificially removing from fundamental consideration what we naturally want to know. The explanatory vacuity is disguised, but only thinly and only temporarily, by – to put it one way – concealing the "why" behind the "that."[5]

The vacuity spreads quickly, once revealed. If we inquire into the role – obviously a central one for the theory, since we are here describing the artist – of the spokesperson who acts on behalf of the art world, we find little explained and the important issues untouched.[6] The spokespersons would not, we naturally assume, have the power they allegedly do with a history of having acted, having put some aspects of artifacts forward, *without good reason*. (This is roughly

the artistic analogue of respecting a person for good character in morality; without that history, the respect does not so much as make sense.) The status of the artifact *if* conferred capriciously, whimsically, and arbitrarily, would be very much called into question, just as would the authority, the power, indeed the artistic status of the artist. If such spokespersons acted without reason in any particular case into which we might inquire, and without a history of good (i.e. justified) preceding actions in the past leading up to the present case, they would earn only the aesthetic analogue of a capricious and arbitrary judge in a court of law who earns opprobrium for those reasons. If the status, in the artistic case, has been conferred *for no reason*, both the status and the artist are thereby in serious doubt.[7] And, most significantly, if the reason for the "putting forward" *is* specified, thus avoiding explanatory vacuity, the reason will move beyond the narrow, circular confines of that definition of the institutional theory, giving a reason for the work of art's *being* a work of art *other* than its institutionally conferred status.

It has been pointedly observed (Wollheim, 1980, p. 164) that in any art theory the conclusion that the classification "Art" (a classification – when it is that – that our intuition, given the depth and the scope of the aesthetic throughout the extensive context of our cultural practices, demands to be taken seriously and given full explanation) is given for no good reason, but simply that it is so given, is an unexpected one. Indeed it is a conclusion that our intuition cannot accept. But it is all the more unexpected in a theory purporting to return to essence-defining, necessary-and-sufficient-condition-specifying analysis after the Wittgensteinian antitheoretical or antidefinitional consensus. A theory that promises a grand return to essential definitions delivers in the end what a harsh critic of the institutional program could only call explanatory vacuity and obfuscation (which is a particularly unexpected result given the analytical clarity with which the theory has been adumbrated).

There is another issue, related to but on a larger scale than the question concerning the institutional theory's ability to say *that* a work of art has been classified "Art" but not *why*. It concerns the possibility of identifying a crucial – and the largest – element of the theory, the art world itself. It has been argued (Crowther, 1981, pp. 12–21) that the art world – meaning the expanding social and cultural network of institutions (or "systems" and "sub-systems" as Dickie calls them) including but not limited to curators, directors, critics, viewers, audiences, collectors, dealers, students, teachers, art schools, performers, writers, actors, translators, publishers, film studios, record companies, etc. – can in fact be identified as an "art world" because we *first* have the concept of art in play. That is, we can categorically cluster all of those diverse "systems" (many are antisystematic in practice) into the covering concept of an art world only because works of art – indeed a very large number of very diverse objects and events – are first identified (which should be impossible if the theory were true) in isolation from (which should be inconceivable if the theory were true) those systems, those institutions. Thus we seem to know too much, too soon, and in too inde-

pendent (from the clustered system) a way; if art did not exist separately from and prior to the systems, we would not be able to classify the institution or system as "art relevant."

That too sounds rather like a problem of circularity, but it is important to note that, in the light of a number of criticisms, the institutional theory has been given a second formulation by Dickie (although it is the first formulation that is primarily discussed). Following Monroe Beardsley's criticism that the language of "status conferral" and "acting on behalf of" an institution is appropriate to formal and formalized institutions within which lines of authority, tradition, and continuity are explicitly codified, Dickie has abandoned those phrases to better preserve what he emphasizes as the *informal* nature of the large collections that make up the art world. He does, however, retain the concept of "status," but it is now construed in terms of achievement of artistic creation rather than conferral (Dickie, 1997, pp. 86–93). Dickie also argues that, while Danto's strategy of indistinguishable counterparts does show that works of art exist within a framework or context, it does not sufficiently reveal the nature of, or the details of, that framework or context. It is Dickie's philosophical aspiration to do just that.

But it must be said that there may be an element of irony here: Danto has gone on (having fully developed a posthistorical, neo-Hegelian aesthetic theory that seems to me better described in historical/metaphysical terms than in institutional ones) to produce volumes of philosophical criticism illuminating countless individual works of art. Dickie has remained committed to the analytical agenda of producing a classificatory definition, which, while it admirably acknowledges the need to remain mindful of artistic practices, still takes on a unifying, essentializing form: "A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an art-world public" (Dickie, 1997, p. 92), and the definition unfolds into corollary definitions of "artist," "public," and "art world." But all are still built on the conceptual foundations reviewed above concerning the post-Wittgensteinian return to art theory. And Dickie has not combated, but rather, in the new formulation, embraced circularity. There are vicious and nonvicious forms, he argues, and the conceptual interdependence of the terms he employs to articulate a definition of art only goes to show, he claims, the parallel mutually interdependent nature, the inflected nature, of the institutional networks or systems that comprise the art world. But that claim, received with varying degrees of credulity, does not address the fundamental problems discussed above.

Before closing, there are still a few further issues that concern, if not the details of the institutional theory, then certainly its conceptual presuppositions. As seen above, the notion of perceptually indistinguishable counterparts is central to Danto's metaphysical formulation of the theory, and it is a presupposition concerning the applicability of this "subtractive" method to all of the visual arts that, I believe, requires reconsideration. For very good reason, Danto emphasizes cases such as Duchamp's snow shovel, porcelain fixtures, bottle rack, and the like – including Warhol's Brillo boxes. They perfectly formulate, in material form, the subtractive question, giving rise to the verbal (philosophical)

form of the question in the minds of those works' perceivers, i.e. "What is left over when we subtract the mere object from the artwork?" The conceptual residue is, again, the atmosphere of theory that constitutes for Danto the essence of art, and it is the simultaneous parallel formulation of this question in material form and in pure thought (achieved by Duchamp, Warhol, et al.) that marks the point at which art and philosophy converge.

It has been argued that this very method of juxtaposed indiscernibles implicitly preserves a way of thinking that stems from Russell and the early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (Wittgenstein, 1974): this is a strategy of atomistic analysis in which an object or an action has an identity only "under a description," thus presuming that an object or action is in a fundamental and, again, a metaphysical sense, *ambiguous* prior to its being given its identity by the description under which it is seen and categorized. The atomistic components (simply stated; the matter could be expressed with far greater complexity) of an action could thus be identified subtractively: if we subtract an intention from an action, we are left with a bodily movement; if we subtract a mind from a person, we are left with a body; if we subtract a meaning from a word, we are left with a sound; and if we subtract the atmosphere from an artwork, we are left with what Danto calls a "mere real thing." It has also been argued that this strategy of atomistic analysis, in which what are taken as the metaphysically categorized *components* of an action, a person, an utterance, and an artwork are identified, is fueled by a deeply underlying Cartesian dualism of mind and body (Hagberg, 1995), and that this pernicious philosophical "picture" or conceptual model has generated a good deal of misconstrual in each of the philosophies of action–mind, language, and art.

But the more localized problem of present concern in relation to the institutional theory of art is the misconstrual of the experience of art that this subtractive method of indiscernibles imposes. To question the presupposition directly, we want to ask whether the distinct *ambiguity* described above is present, i.e. whether an (ambiguous) object presents its ontological ambiguity to an observer, prior to the allegedly stabilizing description under which it is then (unambiguously) seen. To question the presupposition of this method directly, we want to ask if the "subtractive" question, what we might call the "Warholian" or "Duchampian" question (Hagberg, 1995, pp. 136–50), arises or is fitting for *all* cases of artistic perception. In order to apply Danto's version of the institutional theory to *all* art – and that would be, as he readily and naturally agrees, a necessity for any theory attempting to describe the essence of art, the necessary and sufficient conditions for arthood – the question must apply uniformly and universally. (Danto's position is, recall, the driving force of the post-Wittgensteinian "return to theory" following the antitheoretic Wittgensteinian period.)

But, it has seemed to some, it does not universally arise. Indeed, what we need is an *occasion*, a *context* for the asking of the focused Duchampian question, and those naturally contextualized occasions occur only in the relatively rare,

frequently controversial cases of found art, or art that, like Warhol's boxes, replicates a mere real thing not in the manner of traditional representational art, but rather in the distinct ontological space-creating manner Danto has ingeniously described. And, indeed, even the Warhol case is questionable vis-à-vis its fittingness to Danto's subtractive analytical scheme. By collapsing the visual relationship between the artwork and the world (and by calling these ontologically distinct objects "indiscernible counterparts"), Danto can then, seemingly naturally, suggest that because art looks just like what it represents, it is only to be distinguished from reality through the conceptual property of institutional status or atmosphere-importing placement. But the Brillo boxes of Warhol simply do not look like real Brillo boxes (at least under conditions of aesthetically motivated visual scrutiny). Missing or obscuring that fact lends illegitimate force to the institutional conferral of arthood, just as it conceals the actual work done in the piece by the artist. With this in mind, if one looks to painted squares by, for example, Albers or Malevich, one sees that they do *not* look like just any old patch of color, but rather show studied, nuanced, subtle, or delicate qualities that their distinguishable counterparts do not.

The occasions in which the Duchampian question is genuinely engendered in the perceiver are as rare as the cases in which the Duchampian question is materially formulated in the object, and the subtractive method of indiscernibles – while it powerfully reveals the distinct ontological aesthetic of the readymade – thus illuminates not the necessary and sufficient conditions for all of artwork, but rather for one small, if extraordinarily interesting in metaphysical terms, sector of the vast "landscape" of artistic practices and aesthetic achievements. Visual ambiguity of a distinct kind giving rise to questions of ontology, of the categorization of the object before us as "artwork" or "mere thing," is simply not present in the vast majority of perceptions of art, and the noncontroversial perception of art is one part of the lived experience of art, the given phenomenology of art, that any theory must acknowledge. And to the extent that a theory imposes such ambiguity as a conceptual presupposition, that theory – like many earlier theories of art – falsifies the actual experience of art. As a description of one part of art's recent history, Danto's institutional conception is perfectly suited to the task. But as a covering theory for all art, it – as the Wittgensteinian antitheorists suggested – cannot capture art's essence.

In addition to the problems discussed above concerning Dickie's formulation of the theory, there are questions regarding presuppositions here as well. Just as Dickie's formulation harks back to, and is in part built upon, analytical atomism and perceptual ambiguity, so it harks back to, and is built upon, a variety of skepticism and its attendant overgeneralized doubt. If we get so far as to speak of "candidates for appreciation" and (in the earlier formulation) the "conferral of status," we have already endorsed an underlying picture of art objects as a special *sub*-class of objects selected out of a much larger class of non-art objects. That too, I believe, falsifies the experience of art, in terms of the perceiver of art, the creator of art, and the nature of the artwork itself.

First, the falsification of the phenomenology of the perceiver is now familiar: it is like that of Danto's formulation, if more severe. Danto's method arises from some select cases (e.g. Duchamp), and then generalizes from that localized context, a context in which the Duchampian question is both occasioned and intelligibly grounded. Dickie's formulation presupposes from the outset that perceivers will (or should) have, as the first act of interpretive perception, a question concerning the subclassification of the object as artwork. In short, they do not. Viewers are not, universally, blanket-skeptics of an analytical persuasion asking whether object O is a member of class or set S by virtue of the presence of condition C. Much is taken as granted, or as given, in a way that is significant for our understanding of aesthetic knowledge, and it has been argued (Hagberg, 1995, pp. 153–61) that this dimension of the institutional theory needs a far better grasp of what Wittgenstein examined as the grounds, the justifications, for our actions. Indeed, as Wittgenstein showed, the giving of grounds, of justifying, comes to an end, and then we reach "bedrock," i.e. the facts of our practices. Dickie's formulation, for all its admirable concern to respect and reflect multifarious artistic practices, in theoretically universalizing, again unavoidably falsifies. *Some* viewers, in *some* distinct contexts, are skeptics who doubt the classification and who go on to inquire into the condition C that may or may not justify the categorization. As the classical American pragmatists argued, real doubt, *genuine* doubt, is *occasioned*, and not merely imposed, by a philosophical model or "picture"; this version of the institutional theory, in imposing some skeptical doubt within its presupposition, falsely universalizes that which is genuine *on the level of particularity*.

Second, the acts of artistic creation are easily falsified by this formulation of institutionalism as well; I will be brief, although the matter could be extensively examined. As the theory has it, the artist selects a set of aspects of the object created (or found) and then puts those forward as candidates for appreciation; that is the feature – a template for the creative process – that, as a universal theory of art must insist, occurs in every case of artistic creativity. But if we look to the works of art historians, the works of biographers, the autobiographical works of artists along with their manifestos, letters, and so forth, and the works of critics, we encounter a staggering range of diversity that makes this unitary template seem not exactly false, it must be said, but insensitive to the vagaries and vicissitudes of the phenomenology of the artist's mind and the realities of the artist's studio. Again, that would perhaps need to be illustrated in detail, but in such particularized contexts of art-intentional inquiry the institutional phrases seem to miss very much more than they capture. It may be argued that the creation-template offered in the phrases of the institutional theory in truth rationally reconstruct the facts of creativity, imposing order on very messy diversity, and that will perhaps be convincing to those committed to the return to theory, committed to the search for essence. But to those aware of the significance, indeed ineliminability, of particularity for the genuine illumination of any complex, historically evolved human practice, the

"imposition" of order equals only, again, the falsifications of theory over the facts of practice.

Third, the nature of the artwork itself can also be easily distorted by the institutional theory; here I will be most abbreviated. For reasons that once again trace back to Wittgenstein's philosophy, what we call an "aspect" of a thing, in a particular context of perception, is not successfully generalizable. The same is true for the notion of a "set" of aspects, which will, within our natural critical vocabularies, arise only in particular, determinate instances of perception. And "appreciation" is used within the definitional phrase of the institutional theory in a way almost too general to be comprehensible. The art object is described as having aspects – only a set of which are put forward as candidates – that constitute the aesthetically relevant part of the work. Yet anyone attentive to nuances of aesthetic perception and meaning will know that often an "aspect" is an impression of a work that stands against, or runs contrary to, a larger, or more forceful, or more central impression made by the work, for example a distinctly sad passage of Mozart's *Requiem* may still have a smiling-in-a-state-of-calm-acceptance aspect. A balanced, structured and finished "crosshatch" painting by Jasper Johns still exhibits an agitated aspect. And so forth, through countless cases. And if we are told that the *set* of aspects includes the sadness and the smiling, the composure and the agitation, we might again reply, not that the theory is thus shown to be decisively refuted, but rather that differences, subtleties, and nuances are being run together into a "set" of a generalized kind we would never speak of in critical practice (and hence would never find illuminating). Moreover, we are being forced by a universalizing theory to call important parts of our aesthetic experience "aspects" that, quite simply, are not. The phrasing of the institutional theory, vis-à-vis the real nature of the perceived and interpreted work of art before us, is, it will appear when brought down to cases, drastically insufficient to the task. And like all the previous elements of the institutional theory that we have now considered, to the extent that it makes things that are in truth very different look the same, it is a theory that obscures, rather than reveals, genuine aesthetic knowledge.

Although we have in our preliminary intuitions and in a number of the details of the views we have herein considered found much to which objections can be raised in the institutional theory, there remains a lasting sense that there is an element of truth in the institutional theory of art. But the return to theory, as developed in that way, has perhaps proven a wrong direction, both for the many particular reasons we have seen, and also for the larger Wittgensteinian reason that a theory of art, *in this sense*, i.e. where essential properties are analyzed, where necessary-and-sufficient conditions are articulated, where a universal definition of art is proffered, is not possible, because such a theory systematically falsifies what it attempts to illuminate. Like Danto's embracing of a fragmenting pluralism in artistic practices that moves us beyond any unifying teleological master-narrative of art's inexorable development, perhaps it is time to embrace a similar fragmentation that moves us beyond any unifying theory,

assimilating the truth that – consistent with Wittgenstein's pluralistic and antitheoretical stance prior to institutionalism's return to theory – a theory in the above sense is neither possible nor desirable. It was Aristotle who famously said that we should seek only the degree of categorical neatness and theoretical concision that is appropriate to the subject at hand; wary of the dangers of abstract theory, and speaking against Plato's search for universal essence and in favor of a detailed inquiry into the particularities of our practices, he was of course referring to ethics. But it would behoove aestheticians to draw the parallel conclusion for the theory of art.

Notes

1 Similarly influential papers on the impossibility of artistic definition and the resultant impossibility of any art theory that would pretend to provide the necessary and sufficient conditions, or the ineliminable essence, of art include Paul Ziff's "The task of defining a work of art" (1951), W. E. Kennick's "Does traditional aesthetics rest on a mistake?" (1958), and Marshall Cohen's "Aesthetic essence" (1965) among others.

2 And a purpose with a distinguished lineage in philosophy it is, going back to the ancient problem of the One and the Many, the metaphysical problem of asking how and why we classify under a single concept – e.g. Truth, Justice, Beauty, or Art – a multitude of particulars that, in exhibiting seemingly endless diversity, display anything but categorically neat uniformity.

3 In addition to Danto, 1981, and Danto, 1986, see the collections of art criticism in which Danto has explored the posthistorical art scene, including Danto, 1987, Danto, 1990, Danto, 1994, and Danto, 1998.

4 On a detailed, contextualized investigation of our actual critical practices it emerges that these senses are not categorically distinct; it similarly appears that there are not two or three fundamental senses of the used phrase "work of art" emergent from the extensive landscape of contextualized linguistic action.

5 One of the clearest and most direct statements has been provided by Colin Lyas: "People don't put things in galleries just so they can call them 'art,' but because they see some point in doing so. To know the point is to know what value the object is thought to have. That is what the puzzled want to know about all art, and since the institutional account is silent about that it tells us nothing about art" (Lyas, 1997, p. 93).

6 For elucidation of this and the significant issues surrounding it, see Davies, 1991, esp. pp. 81ff.

7 On this point (among his other powerful criticisms), see Wollheim, 1980, pp. 157–66, esp. pp. 161–6.

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